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# **MODERN PLAYS FOR STUDENTS**

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## **THE FAMILY REUNION**





# MODERN PLAYS FOR STUDENTS

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*edited by Nevill Coghill*

AL-71. 265

# THE FAMILY REUNION

by  
T. S. ELIOT

*With an Introduction and Commentary*

*by*

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**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

**Bombay Calcutta Madras**

***Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP***

**London New York Toronto  
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo  
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town  
Melbourne Auckland**

**and associates in  
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City**

**© 1963 Introduction and Notes  
by Nevill Coghill**

***'The Family Reunion' was first  
published in 1939  
Educational edition first published 1969  
published by arrangement with  
Faber and Faber Ltd.  
3 Queen Square, London W.1.C.  
First Indian impression 1974  
Fifth impression 1984***

**Printed in India  
by Rakesh Bagai at Rakesh Press, New Delhi 110 028  
and published by R. Dayal, Oxford University Press  
2/11 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002**

I would like with deep gratitude to acknowledge my debt, in preparing this edition of *The Family Reunion*, to Mrs. T. S. Eliot, who has not only permitted me to have access to and quote from many unpublished letters in her possession, but has also given me every possible help in other ways.

Nevill Coghill



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# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

*page* 11

1. Deepest Purposes	11
2. Some Root Ideas	16
3. The Story Line	22
4. The Essence of the Action	29
5. Argos, The House of Atreus and The Eumenides	37
6. The Slow Stain	44
7. The Flaws	47
8. The Once-born and the Twice-born	51
9. The Verse	58

## THE FAMILY REUNION

65

Commentary	179
Notes to the Introduction and Commentary	229
Chronological Table of Events at Wishwood	235
Selected Reading List	239

*" in the text of the Introduction and Commentary  
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# Introduction

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## 1. DEEPEST PURPOSES

*The Family Reunion* is the most carefully worked, and yet the most deeply flawed, of all Eliot's plays, perhaps of all his writings. The flaws pierce to the heart of the play; yet the things attempted in it are so arresting, original and courageous that even its flaws are better worth discussing than the merits of many a more successful, more ordinary piece.

Underlying all else in the writing of this play there were three shaping purposes: to restore poetry as the natural language of drama: to renew through drama a sense of our involvement with Good and Evil, and so with religious experience and intuition: and to do these things in terms of the conventional, contemporary world of drawing-room manners and conversation which had so long dominated the London stage. In attempting these three things, Eliot was assaulting audiences mainly agnostic in attitude and habituated to naturalistic prose dialogue, who went to the theatre for entertainment rather than for a creative experience.

The finest plays in the drawing-room convention to have won popularity in England between the first and second world wars were those of the great Russian playwright, Anton Chekov (1860-1904), and it was to them that Eliot first turned for a model. Turning over in his mind the play



## Introduction

he was planning to write, he wrote to Mr. Geoffrey Faber on 20 March 1937:

It is a gloomy play, I rather think it is going to be much the grimmest thing I have ever written; when I tell you it is about a birthday party you will see the possibilities: everything goes wrong except the cake. That sounds as if I had been influenced by Chehov, Tchechhoff, Checkhov, and perhaps I have.

In a letter written a little later to Mrs. Faber (24 February 1938) he took up these two points again:

Yes, I hope it is quite clear that nobody dies except Amy (who, as you must have gathered, had a weak heart). The tragedy, as with my Master Tchehov, is as much for the people who have to go on living, as for those who die.

Readers of *The Three Sisters*, *The Seagull*, or *The Cherry Orchard* will see why Eliot chose Chekov for his master; no one is Chekov's equal as the dramatist of the kind of country house over which there broods a sad sense of futility and doom; where nevertheless there are warming, even hilarious touches of human comedy, as well as of heart-break, and the whole is natural and spontaneous and truthful. If all this could be kept in a play of equal verisimilitude, but into which could be injected some theme to include Eliot's growing religious awareness, in a language like the fresh conversation of Chekov's characters, yet heightened into poetry by the extremity of the experience to be enacted, it would carry conviction, even to a London audience, of a religious reality beyond, and yet within, their customary drawing-rooms.

The vision of reality that Eliot wished to show was a Christian vision, as his whole development as a poet and thinker proves; yet he also wished to avoid the direct

## Introduction

mention of Christianity, its explicit teaching and familiar symbols. He had already written two plays (*The Rock*, 1934, and *Murder in the Cathedral*, 1935) designed for Christian audiences at Church festivals; but now, having thereby made a stir as a playwright, he wished to reach a wider and perhaps a more hostile audience, and not confine himself to preaching to the converted; he could, as it were, go out into the wilderness of the fashionable London theatre and hope to be heard, his fame being so well established; but who would listen to a voice, however famous, crying there, if it were at once identifiable with that of Mother Church? She had her pulpits, after all, for those who liked them; she had no business in the theatre.

So *The Family Reunion* was designed to be a crypto-Christian play, with unfamiliar spiritual symbols and pagan overtones, to convey his veiled Christian messages that could not be discounted as Christian in advance. To find a basis for his crypto-Christian theme, Eliot turned from Chekov to Aeschylus, the first of the great poets of the Athenian stage (525–455 B.C.). In his splendid trilogy, the *Oresteia*, there were to be found the things at which Eliot was aiming in his own play — the high and varied poetry, the religious vision of guilt and expiation, man's involvement, through a family curse, with the forces of Good and Evil, and a spiritual way out of a cycle of murder, by the discovery of a supernatural dimension and the intervening of the gods. All this, with a little juggling, could be set in a Christian key.

To use a Greek model in composing a play was then an *avant-garde* idea, already triumphantly used by the American playwright, Eugene O'Neill, in his trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1932); it had the prestige of novelty as well as that of antiquity. It was experimental; it had affinities with the most recent work of the psychoanalysts and their use of Greek myth.



## Introduction

Eliot fashioned his story with meticulous care; following Aeschylus and O'Neill, he took a family curse with a double murder as his central image, and an expiation at the end. The curse was to seem to arise from natural causes and yet lead towards a supernatural solution.

The spiritual violence in the guilt of murder would naturally call for a heightened excitement of language, a conversation strengthened to take a more than usual strain of feeling; though it should never abandon the rhythms and idiom of normal interchange, the feeling that the characters were in genuine, spontaneous talk; yet it must be an empowered way of talking.

So the three deepest purposes in the play were to be served, and could be seen, perhaps, as the single purpose of the Imagination, which Shakespeare says is 'to body forth the forms of things unknown,'<sup>2</sup> to disturb and excite us with what is mysterious in the familiar and touch us with an experience of the kind that only religion and poetry can give account of; it could show that the world of the drawingroom is only one step away from the wilderness, and that we may all be called upon to take that kind of step, as Harry Monchensey is, at any moment. The language of the drawing-room must therefore be ready for that extension of experience. Eliot has made a memorable declaration on this in his Theodore Spencer Lecture given at Harvard in 1950, under the title *Poetry and Drama*:

What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated. What I should hope might be achieved, by a generation of dramatists having the benefit of our experience, is that the audience should find, at the moment of awareness that it is hearing

## Introduction

poetry, that it is saying to itself: '*I could talk in poetry too!*' Then we should not be transported into an artificial world; on the contrary, our own sordid, dreary, daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured.

The technical means by which Eliot worked this miracle will be examined later.

That he had what is essentially the same attitude towards religion as he had towards poetry in drama — namely that it should seem a natural, unselfconscious part of our knowledge and experience of life — can be seen from a letter written in December 1959 to his friend and sometime collaborator, Mr. E. Martin Browne, the chosen director of all his plays:

I should not like to think of Christian art as something contrasting with secular art and in competition with it. . . . I am particularly concerned about drama, because I have always been most desirous to see ordinary plays *written* by Christians rather than plays of *overtly* Christian purpose. In the theatre I feel that one wants a Christian mentality to permeate the theatre, to affect it and to influence audiences who might be obdurate to plays of a directly religious appeal.

These cautious attitudes towards the thoughts nearest his heart hint at a resemblance between Eliot and the first great character of his own creation, J. Alfred Prufrock, whose famous *Love Song* Eliot published in 1917. It is the dramatic monologue of a not-so-young young man, of great diffidence, and oppressed by overwhelming questions — questions such as only Lazarus, risen from the dead, could answer. Eager to confront his hearers, particularly his lady-love, with stupendous problems of life and death, he is shy of doing so, for these are questions of a

## Introduction

kind never posed in polite society; they would be regarded there as a tiresome impertinence. In something the same manner, the maturer Eliot was wary of his eagerness to use his new-found talent in drama to express his poetic and religious imagination. If it was to be heard in the roar of London's secular entertainment, it must wear the uniform of its time and seem secular too; otherwise it might be greeted with the same irritated incomprehension and distaste which Prufrock feared to meet with in his lady-love. The play opened at the Westminster Theatre on the twenty-first of March, 1939, six months before England declared war on Hitler's Germany. A hard time for any play to get a careful hearing.

### 2. SOME ROOT IDEAS

Almost every work of Eliot's seems to have its root in, or to have evolved from, some earlier work of his; and this is easily demonstrable, so consistent in direction and intensity has been his vision. *The Family Reunion* is full of ideas he had been living with and expanding for more than twenty years. They are embedded in the plot-line of the play, and it will help, in discussing it, if we begin by outlining the more important of them.

Chief among them is Eliot's intensifying sense of the spiritual suffocation and death in between-the-wars England and Europe. The feeling began in him before the first world war was over; Prufrock tells us of the intellectual women in the circles he frequents who 'come and go, talking of Michelangelo'; they are larded with culture, but spiritually extinct. It is they and their like who stifle the urgent questions he longs to ask; he is awakened by their voices from his dream, and he is drowned in them, suffocated. *Prufrock* was published in 1917.

*The Waste Land* (1922) tells the same story on a larger



## Introduction

scale; it is the anatomy of a rotting civilisation: a life-in-death.

We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience.

*The Rock* (1934) is a long indictment of the godlessness of London, the loss of all meaning to life, the smothering of the spirit in materialism and commerce. *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) has a chorus of common people — the women of Canterbury — who cannot claim more than that they are 'living, and partly living'; *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926-7) declares, through Sweeney's own mouth, that 'Death is life and life is death' and ironically sums up all existence in the doctrine:

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks;  
Birth, and copulation, and death.  
I've been born, and once is enough.

Sterility of soul could hardly go further.

*The Family Reunion* shows us a similar kind of living death in Wishwood and its cramping routine, in which nothing is ever to be changed, and over which there hangs an unspoken curse. It is one aspect of England in little; its highly respectable occupants are the landed gentry, whose males are benevolent but crass (Uncle Gerald and Uncle Charles) and whose females (Aunt Ivy and Aunt Violet) are spiteful and spinsterly. Faced with reality in terms of their nephew Harry and his deep trouble of soul, they can only write him down as mad, in utter incomprehension, and even Uncle Charles (the nicest of them all) can only mutter at the end of the play:

I am beginning to feel, just beginning to feel,  
That there is something I *could* understand, if I were told  
it.

## Introduction

But I'm not sure that I want to know.

(II. iii. 197-8)

In all these poems and plays the picture offered of the world shows plainly that the meaning has gone out of life. A listless and exhausted society can find nothing to do but go on as before through the endless cycles of time, with all vision of reality and purpose extinguished.

Arising from this basic idea, there comes a gradual sense of the remedy for it, faint at first, but growing stronger and more painful in each successive poem and play; it is the remedy of withdrawal from the love of the world and of giving up your will into the will of God.

The first explicit statement of this theme introduced in Eliot's works is the quotation from St. John of the Cross<sup>n</sup> on the title-page of *Sweeney Agonistes*; this is the title of two fragments of a play that might be considered as a farcical, low-life, try-out for the ideas in *The Family Reunion*; I have already noted one such idea — the sense of the sterility of the background of the play. Two more ideas appear as quotations on the title-page; they are these:

Orestes: *You don't see them, you don't — but I see them:  
they are hunting me down, I must move on.*

Choephoroi.

*Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union,  
until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.*

St. John of the Cross.

The Choephoroi is the name of the second play in Aeschylus' trilogy, the *Oresteia*; in this play Orestes murders his mother for having murdered his father. In *The Family Reunion* we are told that Harry's father meditated the murder of his wife Amy; and their son, Harry, believes himself to have killed his wife and actually does kill his

## Introduction

mother at the end of the play by leaving Wishwood, the family home. Orestes speaks the line quoted above when he sees he is being pursued by the Eumenides — the Avenging Furies of blood-guilt. Harry too is pursued by the Eumenides (though they have a new signification) and almost his first remark in the play is taken from the mouth of Orestes:

Can't you see them? *You* don't see them, but I see them,  
And they see me.

*Sweeney Agonistes* ends with a horror-comic Chorus imitated from W. S. Gilbert's *A Nightmare*:

When you're alone in the middle of the bed and you  
wake like someone hit you on the head  
You've had a cream of a nightmare dream and you've  
got the hoo-ha's coming to you.

Hoo hoo hoo . . .

And you wait for a knock and the turning of a lock for  
you know the hangman's waiting for you.

The hoo-ha's are Eliot's slapstick form for the Eumenides.

Another leading idea in *Sweeney Agonistes*, re-echoed in *The Family Reunion*, is the inevitability of a man's wish to murder his woman:

I knew a man once did a girl in  
Any man might do a girl in  
Any man has to, needs to, wants to  
Once in a lifetime, do a girl in.

Harry's father had sought to murder Amy, his wife; Harry's wife disappeared overboard on an Atlantic crossing; Harry could not rid himself of the obsession that he had pushed her over.

The remedy for the nightmare, for the murderous spiritual fugitive, does not lie in flight but in *detachment*,



## Introduction

the way of St. John of the Cross; for that is what gives meaning to life — *to be possessed of the divine union*. It means surrendering self to the will of God. It is the meaning that will drive Harry out into the wilderness at the end of *The Family Reunion*; but what first gave that meaning to mortal human life was the Incarnation. This is clearly stated in the Opening Chorus of the Second Part of *The Rock*; The Incarnation and Redemption came at a moment

not out of time, but in time, in what we call history. . . .

A moment in time, *but time was made through that moment*: for without the meaning there is no time, *and that moment of time gave the meaning*. (my italics)

For Eliot the sense that our lives are involved in the love and will of God was the only thing that could draw men out of the death-in life he so steadily saw about him, and proclaimed in his poems and plays as the mortal sickness of Europe.

Not only did this answer to what is essentially the Prufrock problem come to him from St. John of the Cross; it came to him also from Dante: *E'n la sua voluntate è nostra pace* (*Paradiso* III, 85) And in His will lies our peace. So the first utterance of St. Peter in *The Rock* is 'Make perfect your will', and it is exactly this which we watch Becket doing in *Murder in the Cathedral*, in the scene in which he confronts the Four Tempters; they are his 'temptations in the wilderness' and he overcomes them by divesting himself of all desire other than that of the submission of his will to that of God. Thus, by his free choice, his life takes on the meaning intended for it, and he is at peace at the still centre of things. To see this is to see a saint in the making.

We see Harry Monchensey at an earlier stage in his spiritual development when we meet him in *The Family*

## Introduction

*Reunion*; for here we are not witnessing a martyrdom but a conversion"; he is in the throes of it as he arrives, hounded by guilt. At Wishwood he catches a glimpse of a long-lost innocent happiness again in his talk with Mary, and of a life of self-denying love in his talk with Agatha, and these are the catalytic agents that change the fugitive from guilt into the follower of a vocation and set him on the hard path of detachment that leads into the 'wilderness'. It is the crisis of his life that we are shown, the redirection of his will; martyrdom and even sanctity may lie before him; but they are not shown us in this play.

This leads me to the last of the general root-notions I think are to be seen as part of Eliot's habit of thought, if for the moment, we pass over his technical thinking in the art of play-construction. It is the idea of a *calling*, of a vocation. This is an extension of what I have just argued. It is the call of the will of God to the will of individual man; Eliot's central figures are marked men, pre-elected to a kind of greatness that makes them rise above their surroundings, because they have dimension in some spiritual world which they try to discover; the faintest-hearted of them is the first, Prufrock.

So, in *The Rock* we meet with individual greatness of soul in St. Peter and Mellitus and Rahere, and in *Murder in the Cathedral*, in Becket. Harry Monchensey is the chosen figure in *The Family Reunion*. In Amy and Agatha we see other such chips of leadership from the family block. They too have their own, less spectacular, vocations: Agatha to the austerities of her female college, and her puritanism; Amy to such sanctity and martyrdom as her wordly religion, the worship of Wishwood, afforded. The rest are those who need their leadership, vision and help; Mary, the Uncles and the Aunts, not leaders but led — the 'living and partly living' people we see in *Murder in the Cathedral*, in *The Rock*, in *Sweeney Agonistes*, and even among those name-dropping

## Introduction

ladies in *Prufrock*, that think themselves so cultured.

Briefly then to sum up these root ideas, they are the death-in-life of Christendom between the two world wars, the meaninglessness of life without knowledge of God and of the Incarnation; the impulse to murder a woman, especially a wife or mistress, the flight from a sense of pursuing guilt, and the true remedy which lies not in flight but in withdrawal from the love of the world into possession by the love of God, by a purification of the will. Lastly that there are those that seem singled out to receive a call for this withdrawal, who become our spiritual leaders, as if elected or predestined to this kind of conversion and vocation.

### 8. THE STORY LINE IN THE FAMILY REUNION

The play, as I have said, shows us a three-hour crisis in the life of Harry, Lord Monchensey. But this crisis has been brewing forty years; to understand it we must understand what happened in those years. The information is gradually slipped out here and there in conversation during the play, but so skilfully that we scarcely notice we are being informed.

As it is impossible to reach the deeper meanings of Eliot's work without a clear knowledge of the story, it seems simplest to begin by gathering all the scattered hints and items of information together into a straightforward narrative. It was intended to be imagined as something happening *at that twentieth-century moment*, not in some imaginary past. What follows here is the outline, based, in the matter of dates, on the supposition that the crisis of Harry's conversation came upon him in March, 1939, when the play opened in London; for it was then, clearly, a contemporary play.



## *Introduction*

The curtain rises on a family birthday party not yet fully assembled, to celebrate the sixtieth<sup>n</sup> birthday of Amy, Dowager Lady Monchensey, at Wishwood, the family country seat (in the north of England). She had dominated it for nearly forty years, since her marriage at the beginning of the present century to the late Lord Monchensey.

It had been a loveless marriage, entered into for what, no doubt, had been considered good, sound, family reasons, at the time; but it had bred unhappiness and evil.

For a while the young couple lived uneasily together at Wishwood, cold and lonely, in the reserved, traditional style of gentlefolk, a style that has generally tended to subordinate personal happiness to the interests of the family and its continuance in a hereditary home. For three years the marriage hung fire; what was happening between the bride and bridegroom we do not know, but we are told 'There was no ecstasy' (II. ii. 72). Amy, however, was a natural matriarch; if, during these three years, husband and wife were gradually taking stock of each other, she was no less gradually transferring her feelings of possession from her husband (who seemed to elude her) to Wishwood itself, her new home. He, it is suggested, was mildly continuing to lead a rather withdrawn, sensitive, inward life:

An exceptionally cultivated country squire,  
Reading, sketching, playing on the flute,  
Something of an oddity to his country neighbours,  
But not neglecting public duties.  
He hid his strength beneath unusual weakness,  
The diffidence of a solitary man.

(II. ii. 65-70)

Where he was weak he recognised his wife's power, and yielded to it. We may guess that during these uneasy years Amy was reaching a decision to create anew the dynasty

## Introduction

into which she had married; and if she was to become a matriarch, she must first coldly see to it that she became a mother.

It was in the summer of 1904, 'on a summer day of unusual heat' (II. ii. 90), when Amy was in her first pregnancy, that the blow, so likely to fall on such a house, fell suddenly, out of a clear sky. Amy's youngest sister, Agatha, then a girl of twenty-one and still at College, came to spend her vacation at Wishwood and at once fell in love with her brother-in-law, and he with her.

I only looked through the little door  
When the sun was shining on the rose-garden  
And heard in the distance the tiny voices  
and then a black raven flew over.

(II. ii. 183-6)

Their bliss of love had come to them on the dark wings of renunciation. Autumn came. Amy's child — Harry that was to be — was due before Christmas (II. ii. 107). The unwilling father on whom she had forced this son (II. iii. 21) was already trying to think (but with no success) how to murder his wife.

What simple plots!

He was not suited to the role of murderer.

(II. ii. 103)

Amy was a woman of a certain greatness; so was Agatha. Agatha was not only thinking of her lover and their love, and restraining him from his foolish fantasies of murder; she was also thinking of her sister's coming baby, the child in her womb; she wished it had been *her* child and loved it as if it were. The child-to-be of course was Harry, and her feeling about him, even before he was born, made a secret bond of affinity between them; so that, later on, she was always 'Agatha' to him, not 'Aunt



## *Introduction*

Agatha'. It was as if the love of which she had had to divest herself (the love she felt for Harry's father) was spiritually transferred to Harry; for she and Harry's father knew that they must part, who had never been truly together, and turn away from each other; she to walk endlessly 'down a concrete corridor, in a dead air' (II. ii. 188).

There was no scandal (II. i. 92). In due course Harry was born and, in the years that followed, his brothers John and Arthur were born too. After seven years of this life-in-death, with uncommitted murder in his heart, Amy's husband left her (II. iii. 17), travelled abroad and faded out in solitude; we are told nothing of his death save that he died when Harry was still a boy (II. i. 77-78).

Meanwhile Agatha, having renounced love, returned to her academic life, accepted her spinsterhood, and gave her great talent, the equal perhaps of Amy's, to the government of a woman's College." Baulked of their human loves, these two women had both given their energies to institutions, and governed them with austere, undeviating authority, each in her own way. Agatha governed a College, Amy her family at Wishwood.

Amy's thoughts were now for the future; that meant the future of Wishwood, the future of the Monchensey dynasty; Harry must marry. She must find him a suitable wife. She picked on a young girl of a suggestible, submissive nature, a remote cousin of her own, born about 1909 (I. i. 73), and not too rich; she would do. So Mary was imported to Wishwood for her holidays while still a little girl. She fell quietly and permanently in love with Harry, as Amy had intended. Unhappily Harry had no such feeling for her, and she knew herself unwanted; even Amy did not really want her, as Mary humbly admitted; she only wanted 'a tame daughter-in-law with very little money, a house-keeper companion for her and Harry'

## *Introduction*

(I. ii. 52). Wanted or not, however, Mary remained a permanent guest in the great, cold, hate-filled house.

The oppression of Wishwood and its matriarch was increasingly felt by Harry during his school years:

When we were children, before we went to school  
The rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother;  
Misconduct was simply being unkind to mother;  
What was wrong was whatever made her suffer,  
And whatever made her happy was what was virtuous —  
When we came back, for the school holidays,  
They were not holidays, but simply a time  
In which we were supposed to make up to mother  
For all the weeks during which she had not seen us  
Except at half-term, and seeing us then  
Only seemed to make her more unhappy, and made us  
Feel more guilty, and so we misbehaved  
Next day at school, in order to be punished,  
For punishment made us feel less guilty. . . .

(II. i. 20–35)

This does not only give us a picture of Harry's life as a boy, it shows his wry, punishment-loving, puritan wit, bitterly pleased with itself, and touched with petulant self-pity. He has clearly never known affectionate love, repentance, generosity, forgiveness, lasting innocence, or joy. His only moments that approached happiness as a child, were when he could escape with Mary to a hollow tree 'in what we called the wilderness' (I. ii. 138) to play Red Indians with her and his younger brothers; it was towards a harsher wilderness, at the end of the play, that he was to turn his steps.

Through these loveless years, under Amy's firm though, by intention, benevolent tyranny, Harry rose to manhood and the need for independence. He decided to marry. We are told nothing of this decision, but it is made clear that

## *Introduction*

he chose a wife of the kind that would cut him adrift from Wishwood; Amy diagnosed the motive of her son's ill-chosen wife:

She never wished to be one of the family,  
She only wanted to keep him to herself  
To satisfy her vanity.

(I. i. 168-70)

The marriage was as loveless as his father's had been; history was beginning to repeat itself. The pattern was still imprecise, but the new loneliness was there, just as it had been when Harry's father had married Amy. Harry tells Agatha of his feelings at that time:

At the beginning, eight years ago,  
I felt, at first, that sense of separation,  
Of isolation unredeemable, irrevocable —  
It's eternal, or gives a knowledge of eternity,  
Because it feels eternal while it lasts. That is one Hell.  
Then the numbness came to cover it — that is another —  
That was the second Hell of not being there,  
The degradation of being parted from myself . . .

(II. ii. 19-26)

It is not an easy state of being to explain, but perhaps it may be crudely suggested that Harry, escaping from the possessive, tyrannous love his mother exercised upon him, accepted a separation from all he had ever known at Wishwood, but found no capacity in his too-hastily chosen wife for the generous love he needed; a woman of Agatha's insight could perhaps have given it to him. A kind of numbness or starvation settled upon him and the sense of being in a dream or nightmare; what seemed to be the curse upon his father was beginning to operate on him; he had strange fancies, and a strange way of expressing them, as if he were a poet:



## Introduction

Perhaps my life has only been a dream  
Dreamt through me by the minds of others.

(II. ii. 126-7)

It was a dream of murder, no doubt of the same fanciful kind as his father's dreams of murdering Amy. '*Simple plots.*' He was not 'suited to the role of murderer' either; more forceful than Prufrock, less so than Sweeney.

For eight years of constant attendance on an estranging marriage, that led him from party to party, country to country and continent to continent at the high heels of his wife, the nightmare gathered strength, until at last, the 'murder' happened. Harry's wife, by one account, was 'swept off the deck in the middle of a storm' (I. i. 156). But by Harry's account, he pushed her overboard on a cloudless night (I. i. 337). Such at least was his nightmare impression of events; in the end, after talking to Agatha, he began to realise

Perhaps I only dreamt I pushed her.

(II. ii. 128)

If it was a dream (as we are allowed to believe) it was a dream of wish-fulfilment. The guilt of that wish remained with him in the form of an accusation. He had committed murder in his heart.

Certainly it was from that confused moment that he began to feel himself haunted and hunted by seemingly evil, supernatural presences that remained invisible, yet seemed to crowd and jostle him, to contaminate and feed upon him (II. iii. 304-7). These, though he gives them no name, were the Eumenides; to escape pollution, instinct told him to run for home; but there, where he had hoped to find safety, the 'sleepless hunters' were already before him; there they suddenly appeared and confronted him.

## *Introduction*

Also assembled and awaiting him he found his family; it was his mother's birthday. Here the play begins.

### 4. THE ESSENCE OF THE ACTION

To put the action in a sentence, Harry returns, guilty of murder in his heart, to Wishwood, in hysterical flight from the avenging angels of conscience; but thanks to his conversations first with Mary and later with Agatha, his heart is changed and he comes to understand that he must follow those angels (however great the suffering it may involve), not flee from them. That change of heart is the action of the play.

The play opens with a portrait of Wishwood, the dead end of an old family, once wealthy and perhaps distinguished, but no longer so; except for Amy and Agatha, hardly one of the gathering of aunts and uncles shows the flicker of a living mind; they have gathered neither in affection or dislike, but from a habit of family solidarity, in obedience to Amy. Harry's homecoming, however, not Amy's birthday, is the true cause of their assembling. Eight years have passed since they were last assembled (I. i. 105); eight years before, Harry had married and left; and now he was coming back, a widower, whose wife had died mysteriously at sea a year ago; should they mention this in conversation now? Death is a disturbing subject, 'just before a party too,'<sup>n</sup> this time a birthday party.

There is a purposeless torpor in the world of Wishwood. Its life — if life it can be called — has no meaning beyond itself; it lives on in order to live on, under the simple and indomitable will of Amy:

If you want to know why I never leave Wishwood  
That is the reason. I keep Wishwood alive

## Introduction

To keep the family alive, to keep them together,  
To keep me alive, and I live to keep them.

(I. i. 82-5)

She knows that they will all die; death will come to them  
and to herself, but only as a mild surprise,

A momentary shudder in a vacant room.

(I. i. 88)

It is interesting to compare Amy's point of view with a  
threatening Chorus line in *The Rock*:

Life you may evade, but Death you shall not.

Amy seems to shrug such a threat off with a touch of  
aristocratic hauteur which becomes her well; let death  
come, (she seems to say); she will be about Wishwood's  
business until it does; if Wishwood has no meaning, nor has  
death:

Only Agatha seems to discover some meaning in death  
Which I cannot find.

(I. i. 89-90)

This is the setting into which Harry storms, seemingly mad,  
pursued by the Eumenides.

At the beginning of the scene with Mary (I. ii. 110),  
Harry tells her that all these years he has been longing to  
get back — to Wishwood, it would seem, but he is really  
in search of his innocence, the rare happiness of moments  
in his childhood, shared — did she really share them? —  
with Mary:

Were you ever happy here, as a child at Wishwood?

(I. ii. 121)

She answers that their happiness had no freedom



## Introduction

in it; it was all planned by Amy — except for one thing:

The hollow tree in what we called the wilderness

(I. ii. 138)

It was where she and Harry had fought the Red Indians, Arthur and John. But later Amy had had the tree cut down, and replaced it with a neat summer-house, 'to please the children' (I. ii. 152).

The question in Harry's mind is whether there were two ways of life, an innocent and a guilty, or whether there was really only *one* — an innocent one that turned inevitably into guilt, with no way back or out, and brought with it a total loss of hope (I. ii. 119). You do not know what hope is (Harry says) until you have lost it (I. ii. 167). In the intimacy of this conversation with Mary, as it moves towards its lyrical duet (I. ii. 250–78), Mary suggests that he is still capable of hope; he must have hoped for something in returning to Wishwood, she argues (I. ii. 188–9); he had expected to find his real self there (I. ii. 195–6); but if Wishwood had proved a cheat, perhaps the cheat was in himself:

You attach yourself to loathing

As others do to loving: an infatuation

That's wrong, a good that's misdirected. You deceive  
yourself

Like the man convinced that he is paralysed

(I. ii. 232–35)

What Harry needs to do, she thinks, is to alter something inside him (I. ii. 198). Her words and the intimacy that goes with them touch Harry with a glimmering attraction, a kind of returning hope; so that he says:

You bring me news

Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,

## Introduction

Sunlight and singing; when I had felt sure  
That every corridor only led to another,  
Or to a blank wall . . .

(I. ii. 283-7)

But, as he speaks, the Eumenides make their presence felt; the curtains part and they appear.

Here we are lucky in having Eliot's comment on the scene; in a letter to Martin Browne<sup>n</sup> he writes:

The scene with Mary is meant to bring out, as I am aware it fails to, the conflict inside him between . . . repulsion for Mary as a woman, and the attraction which the *normal* part of him that is left, feels toward her personally *for the first time*. This is the first time since his marriage ('there was no ecstasy') that he had been attracted towards any woman. The attraction glimmers for a moment in his mind, half-consciously as a possible 'way of escape', and the Furies (for the Furies are *divine* instruments, not simple hellhounds) come in the nick of time to warn him away from this evasion — though at that moment he misunderstands their function.

Because of this misunderstanding, he also misunderstands Mary; he has not fully taken in what she has told him; but what she has told him is at the very heart of the play. *Harry has to be twice born; and that is painful.*

I believe the moment of birth  
Is when we have knowledge of death  
I believe the season of birth  
Is the season of sacrifice  
For the tree and the beast, and the fish  
Thrashing itself upstream:  
And what of the terrified spirit  
Compelled to be reborn . . . ?

(I. ii. 268-75)

## *Introduction*

But Harry is in no state to take this in, as yet. The Eumenides appear. Mary, pretending not to see them, draws the curtains to hide them from Harry; but he thinks she has done so blindly, out of incomprehension:

Are you so imperceptive, have you such dull senses  
That you could not see them? If I had realised  
That you were so obtuse, I would not have listened  
To your nonsense.

(I. ii. 328-31)

The glimpse of innocence, the flicker of hope she had given him seem to have been extinguished; yet the Eumenides have signalled the first turning of the stair Harry has to climb; there will be a second turning after he has spoken with Agatha.

The interview with Mary has broken new ground for Harry, even if it has not cleared the way for him; she herself does not know how to interpret what she has seen, and thinks the Eumenides are a danger to him for she says so to Agatha later:

Can you not stop him? Cousin Agatha, stop him!  
You do not know what I have seen and what I know!  
He is in great danger . . .

(II. iii. 85-88)

But they are more of a danger to her; they mean she is to lose Harry after all; they are going to lead him away from her and this Agatha explains to her:

We must all go, each in his own direction,  
You, and I, and Harry . . .

(II. iii. 109-10)

The scene with Mary concludes the first half of the essential action; it has reminded Harry of his innocence, so long threatened as to be almost lost. The scene with



## Introduction

Agatha concludes the second. Agatha's contribution is to show Harry the nature of love, a thing outside his experience till then; for he is cursed to bear the lovelessness of his family. The love she is able to teach him is of two kinds: the love of attachment — of man to woman — and the love of detachment — of man or woman from all created beings — that leads to the divine union; that divesting of oneself from the call of the world which St. John of the Cross tells us is the way to be taken by those who seek to unite their wills with the will of God; Agatha does not speak of God directly, of course, nor of taking the way of the cross; but she means the pursuit of austerity by self-denial and service to others, a puritan road as it may seem to some, a long, dark, night of the soul. There is no promise of joy held out by her, only of a surrender of the will, and in that surrender, peace, if Dante is right; but she does not even hold out Dante's promise explicitly. Of her experience of earthly love she says

There are hours when there seems to be no past or future,  
Only a present moment of pointed light  
When you want to burn. When you stretch out your  
hand  
To the flames. They only come once,  
Thank God, that kind.

(II. ii. 92-96)

We are forced to remember that love had come to her bringing with it its own renunciation, once and for all. It was an unentered rose-garden, with children in it; (II. ii. 183-5), we find the same images for that happiness in *Burnt Norton*,

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden . . .

## *Introduction*

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
Even while the dust moves  
There rises the hidden laughter  
Of children in the foliage . . .

Her experience of divine love is more doubtful, but its austerity is thus expressed:

Perhaps there is another kind,  
I believe, across a whole Thibet of broken stones  
That lie, fang up, a lifetime's march. I have believed this.  
(II. ii. 96-8)

'I have known neither,' says Harry.

It is Agatha who comes nearest to explaining their destiny; 'What we have written,' she says, 'is not a story of detection — of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.' (II. ii. 129-30)

. . . It is possible  
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,  
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.  
Indeed it is possible.

(II. ii. 186-9)

and this strange way of accepting a vicarious, intercessory mission, with its metaphorical mention of purgatory, is the closest Agatha, or any other, gets to an explicit use of Christian symbol in this play; her explanation brings immediate joy to Harry:

Look, I do not know why,  
I feel happy for a moment, as if I had come home.  
It is quite irrational, but now  
I feel quite happy, as if happiness  
Did not consist in getting what one wanted  
Or in getting rid of what can't be got rid of  
But in a different vision. This is like an end.

(II. ii. 142-8)



## Introduction

Out of this joy comes hope; Eliot explains it (in terms very similar to those in the text) in two sequent letters he wrote to Mrs. Faber about Harry's fate:

21 Feb. 1938. . . . I hasten to cheer you up: yes, there is a gleam of hope for Harry, as for Orestes, Oedipus, and all the other men who got into hereditary Greek jams. That shall be shewn in the sequel, if there ever is is a sequel.

24 Feb. 1938. . . . But there is hope for Harry — the hope of learning to want something different, rather than of getting anything he wanted.

So when Harry says to Agatha 'This is like an end', she quickly puts him right by telling him it is also a beginning. This is in consonance with all Eliot's thinking; *East Coker* (1940) begins 'In my beginning is my end' and it ends 'In my end is my beginning'. Alpha and omega are at one.

Harry's change of heart and change of direction have happened before our eyes in these two almost love-scenes; they are the action of the play. What happens before is a preparation for them, what happens after is a rounding-off. Harry takes his departure from Wishwood once more, and it kills Amy.

In a letter dated 12 April 1939 Eliot wrote to Professor Bonamy Dobrée:

I think one ought to have a satisfactory explanation for what happens, on every plane. Not having been able to prevent people from asking: why does Harry go away? I ought at least to have had an answer for them on that plane. It is a great mistake to allow people to raise questions for which there is no answer.

Prufrock would have agreed. On the other hand, in a letter to Martin Browne, of 20 September 1956, Eliot wrote (a propos of *Murder in the Cathedral*):

## *Introduction*

I like to leave questions for the audiences to resolve for themselves, and one question which is left for them if the Knights and the Tempters are different actors, is the question whether the Fourth Tempter is an evil angel, or possibly a good angel. After all the Fourth Tempter is gradually leading Becket to his sudden resolution and simplification of his difficulties.

Harry's departure permits many interpretations, but Amy's seems to be the nearest to the truth:

Harry is going away — to become a missionary  
(II. iii. 149)

A letter from Mrs. Eliot, dated 12 March, 1968, tells me:

. . . When someone asked my husband what Harry does when he leaves Wishwood, or where he goes, TSE replied that what he had in mind was something like the career or pilgrimage of Charles de Foucauld. The 'Hermit of the Sahara' was certainly behind 'the prayer in forgotten places' in MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL and

'The worship in the desert; the thirst and deprivation  
A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar  
The heat of the sun and the icy vigil  
A care over lives of humble people  
in THE FAMILY REUNION.

### 5. ARGOS, THE HOUSE OF ATREUS AND THE EUMENIDES

We can now pause to admire the Greek façade of this Christian piece, and ask ourselves how functional it is. Just as Eliot has suppressed almost all verbal clues to the Christian purpose of his play, so too he has suppressed almost all clues to his Aeschylean original. The Eumenides are nowhere named in the dialogue; in so far as they have

## Introduction

a name they are called 'ghosts' or 'spectres' (II. iii. 244); they appear as Eumenides in the stage directions, but as Eliot finally decided that they should not appear on the stage — for he said, in his Harvard Lecture, 'they must, in future be omitted from the cast, and be understood to be visible only to certain of my characters, and not to the audience' — they cannot appear in the programme either, and the only hint of what they are is given in Harry's exclamation '*You don't see them, but I see them*' at the beginning of the play (I. i. 231). Not many, in an average audience, would instantly recognise this exclamation and recall Orestes and the Eumenides; or hear the overtones of Aeschylus, adding their sonority to the situation. There is another infinitesimal clue in this passage; I have italicised it:

*And whether in Argos or England*  
There are certain inflexible laws  
Unalterable, in the nature of music.

(II. i. 429)

It was at *Argos* that Clytemnestra slew her husband Agemennon, and that her son, Orestes, slew his mother Clytemnestra, for having done so: and so was confronted and pursued by the Eumenides.

The *Oresteia* was a part of Eliot's thinking and he seems to have assumed his audiences to be as familiar with the curse on the House of Atreus as he was.

Eliot used this once-famous myth as the basis of his play, in respect of four of its main ideas. First there is the idea of an hereditary family curse in which crime leads to crime in an endless sequence of revenge, a cycle of horror from which there seems to be no way out; it repeats itself through the generations in varying keys, as music repeats itself. Secondly there is the idea of a protagonist (Orestes) bearing the guilt of his family, and contributing to it by the



## Introduction

murder of his mother; he is then driven by the Eumenides to seek the gods for help. Thirdly there are the Eumenides, who in Æschylus also change their character; they begin as Furies, thirsty for vengeance upon the blood-guiltiness of Orestes; but when the gods Apollo and Pallas Athene (together with the citizens of Athens) have ordained, after fair trial and argument, that Orestes is to go free, Athene wins the Eumenides round to be the guardians of Athens by promising them honour and worship there; they accept her promises, take Athens as their home and speak a blessing on it.

What this strange story meant to a Greek in 485 B.C. is a matter for classical scholars and anthropologists to determine, but need not concern us here. Eliot, like O'Neill, used it in his own way and for his own purposes. The myth was not resuscitated by Eliot for its historical interest, but to find a classic parallel to suit his own ideas of sin and expiation. Though the parallel was not exact,<sup>2</sup> each story illustrated in its own way what Eliot regarded as 'certain inflexible laws, unalterable' (II. i. 430-31) in the nature of the universe and its moral demands upon us.

It remains for me to attempt some account of the symbolism of the Eumenides that makes sense not only with the *Oresteia* but also with *The Family Reunion*; in doing so, I ask for it to be remembered that symbols are not like allegories, which are designed for exact interpretation (and if you miss it you are simply wrong about it) but are images suggestive of significances; the reader accepts these suggestions as best he may and places what value he can on them, so as to form a comprehensive understanding of what he deems to be at the heart of the poem in which he meets with them. Although he can offer evidence for his vision, it is mainly subjective, his alone; other readers will have different visions, and will also be able to organise evidence in their own support. Some ways of looking at a



## Introduction

poem clash with others. I am attempting to look at it in what I believe was Eliot's way. I know there are others.

At the core of the significance of the Eumenides in ancient times lay the idea of a supernatural pursuit of vengeance for the sin of blood-guilt, especially for matricide, foulest of all the crimes against blood and nature. The pursuers are thought of as female spirits, dwelling beneath the ground; though in Aeschylus they are a numberless chorus, they are elsewhere generally identified with the Three Furies, Tisiphone, Megaera and Alecto, and even with a fourth figure, Nemesis; there is a fifth called Adrasta, named by Plutarch as the daughter of Zeus and Necessity. The others have had various origins assigned to them. Some say they were earth-daughters from the time when the blood of Saturn was shed on it; others that they were the daughters of Night and the hellish river of Acheron. But all agree that they are the divine ministers of a divine justice, inexorably stern and cruel in the pursuit of guilt and in its punishment. It is said that they were held in such terror that it was dangerous to speak their names or contemplate their temples.

It is to be noticed that their form and their function seem to have got mixed with each other. They are as horrifying in their nature and appearance as the punishment they exact. They punish foulness, but are foul themselves. This, then, is the first element that Eliot has taken over from the classics for his own Eumenides; he thinks of them as black and midnight hags, avengeresses of blood-guilt (the murder of a woman), that seem (to the fugitive) to be foul themselves.

The second element, that he has taken directly from Aeschylus, is *their change of heart*. In Aeschylus, their hearts are changed; in Eliot, they seem to change, at least in Harry's eyes. The change in Aeschylus is due to their being won over (by the promise of being honoured with

## Introduction

altars and sacrifices in Athens), to being favourable to their worshippers there; no winds shall blow to wreck the olive groves, no civil wars shall rend the city. Grace shall be rendered for grace and love shall be the common will.

These were the figures Eliot chose to be the 'objective correlatives' of the spiritual forces set in motion by the curse of lovelessness transmitted from Amy and her husband, to Harry and his wife, with their attendant 'murders'. There was no love at Harry's begetting, no love but domination in his upbringing, no love in his flight from Wishwood, no love in the marriage into which he fled; in both men the will to murder a woman had been aroused, but in Harry a new understanding is vouchsafed during the play; as Dame Helen Gardner has so well put it in *The Art of T. S. Eliot*:

Once he can acknowledge the awful truth: 'Behold I was shapen in wickedness and in sin hath my mother conceived me' he can see what is demanded of him and what is promised: 'But lo, thou requirest truth in the inmost parts and shalt make me to understand wisdom secretly.'

Now if the Eumenides, under Eliot's hand, had become the 'objective correlative' determining Harry's part in the Monchensey Curse, the Curse itself — the whole story we have considered, Eumenides and all — is the 'objective correlative', deliberately fashioned by Eliot — to correspond to the human situation, as seen in the Christian doctrine of the Fall of Man, that *we are sinners in a world of sin, and that this sin calls for expiation*. It is to this realisation that the Eumenides are driving Harry on. As I have said, the Greek story now takes a Christian twist. In Aeschylus, the Eumenides change, Orestes remains the same; in Eliot, they do not change, it is Harry who changes; they continue to do what they had done from the



## Introduction

start, that is, they pursue Harry like the Hound of Heaven, into an awareness of his contamination and guilt, and to an expiation that is always called for, whether here or in Argos, 'by inflexible laws, unalterable;' that justice must be done and the balance of the universe righted, in the 'perpetual struggle between Good and Evil'.

The action of the play, concerned as it is with what happens in a soul, is open to psychological as well as to religious interpretation, so long as the former does not negate the latter. It was intended as a contemporary play in contemporary terms, and Eliot was fully aware of recent advances in psychology and psychoanalysis, as the fact that he chose a psychoanalyst's couch as the central feature in his next play, *The Cocktail Party*, proves. One might even suggest that Harry is, in a sense, on such a couch himself, during his interviews with Mary and Agatha, in that what is revealed in these interviews delves back into the experiences of his childhood, and earlier still, when he was in the womb.

The fourth idea he took or seems to have taken — but here there are no verbal clues — is one of a *general* depravity or corruption in which the individual is involved by being born into a certain family, and to which he in turn contributes. Orestes is born into the house of Atreus, and it is he who has to carry its history of guilt, add to it, and yet 'find out the remedy'.<sup>2</sup> Like a man living in a sewer, contributing to it, hopeless of a way out, yet seeking one.

The story of the House of Atreus with its incestuous lust, child-murders, cannibal feasts (where father is forced to eat child), rape, treachery and living hatred, is too long a tale to tell in detail here; besides it is easily available in the second volume of Mr. Robert Graves' excellent book, *The Greek Myths*. The story has the value of myth; it can stand as a symbol for the idea of a pervasive, inescapable, hereditary evil that corrupts all human society; in Christian parlance it

## Introduction

can stand as a symbol for what is known as Original Sin, and it is this I think, which is figured in the frenzied imagery that Harry uses to convince his hearers of a reality he has experienced of which they know nothing, and which is part of 'the perpetual battle of Good and Evil' spoken of in *The Rock*. Here are some examples of Harry's terror-conscious imagery:

You are all people

To whom nothing has happened . . . .

. . . You have gone through life in sleep,

Never woken to the nightmare. . . . You do not know

The noxious smell untraceable in the drains,

Inaccessible to the plumbers, that has its hour of the  
night; you do not know

The unspoken voice of sorrow in the ancient bedroom

At three o'clock in the morning. I am not speaking

Of my own experience, but trying to give you

Comparisons in a more familiar medium. I am the old  
house

With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning,

In which all past is present, all degradation

Is unredeemable. . . .

(I. i. 301-314)

The sudden solitude in a crowded desert

In a thick smoke, many creatures moving

Without direction, for no direction

Leads anywhere but round and round in that vapour —

Without purpose and without principle of conduct

In flickering intervals of light and darkness;

The partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling

And partial observation of one's own automatism

While the slow stain sinks deeper through the skin

Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone —



## Introduction

This is what matters, but it is unspeakable  
Untranslatable. . . .

(I. i. 320-31)

It goes a good deal deeper  
Than what people call their conscience; it is just the cancer  
That eats away the self.

(I. i. 358-60)

In and out in an endless drift  
Of shrieking forms in a circular desert  
Weaving with contagion of putrescent embraces  
On dissolving bone . . .

(II. ii. 195-8)

This is the language of a vision of sin, and to this subject we must now turn in its Christian sense, if we are to reach the innermost meanings of the play.

### 6. THE SLOW STAIN

The central experience of *The Family Reunion*, as I have already said, is an experience of conversion, arising from a conviction of personal sin and of the general sinfulness of the world. In a letter to Eleanor Hinkley, dated 13 September 1939, Eliot wrote:

I do not, of course, agree about psychology. If the horror of sin disappears, so much the worse for human beings, because sin will always remain, even if people are persuaded for a generation or two that it is a delusion . . . Psychology may help us to distinguish between disease and sin, but does not abolish either. To do away with a sense of sin is to do away with civilisation.

That Harry regarded himself as sinful is easy to understand; he believed himself to have murdered his wife; his

## Introduction

heart had murder in it. But his sense of belonging to a contaminated world reflects, as I have suggested, the Christian doctrine of the Fall of Man which, in the twentieth century, is popularly regarded as a fable connected with the story of Adam and Eve, and with the hereditary depravity (called Original Sin) which their transgression is supposed to have handed on for ever to the whole human race. It is loosely thought that the doctrine of Evolution and the researches of anthropology have somehow done away with the whole problem, because they have demonstrated that there never was a state of Original Righteousness or a Garden of Eden. All this is very superficial.

The idea of a permanent inclination in all human beings towards evil is very much older and more universal than the explanation, or rather illustration of it, taken from the mysterious, poetical myth in *Genesis*. It properly originates in the philosophical question '*Whence did evil come?*', to which various religions have given various answers. The Christian answer is 'Not from God, for God is all-good, and no evil can come from Him'; yet there is but one God and all that is is the creation of His sole omnipotence.

If He is all-good and all-powerful (comes the question) when and whence did evil come? And why did He not prevent it? The Christian answer to this conundrum tends to the idea that the origin of evil is to be sought in the voluntary rebellion of created wills, in opposition to God, a rebellion that took place before — perhaps eons before — the appearance of human beings on this planet; why it took place we do not know; but if God for His unknowable purposes created spiritual beings, endowing them with wills that were free, then a free will is free to rebel. At some point in the evolution of man, (so runs the Christian explanation) man also freely aligned himself with the rebellious power; and so partly diverged from an upward career or spiritual evolution for which God had designed

## Introduction

him; this divergence caused in him an inherent, continuing bias or twist towards evil and rebellion; God permitted this because to have prevented it would have been to withdraw the principle of free will from His creation. These inscrutable things have been argued by the finest minds for over twenty centuries; what I have offered is no more than the barest indication of the endlessly debated problem of the origin of evil. When Harry speaks of 'the slow stain', he is referring to the taint or twist of evil in us all that is loosely called Original Sin. A moving paragraph on the subject may be taken from Cardinal Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864), a classic undoubtedly known to Eliot:

To consider the world . . . The greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain that hangs over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary, hopeless irreligion, the condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle's words, 'having no hope and without God in the world' — all this is a vision to dizzy and appal; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution.

What shall be said to this heart-piercing, reason-bewildering fact? I can only answer, that either there is no Creator, or this living society of men is in a true sense discarded from His presence . . . the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator.

All this is obviously and immediately related to Eliot's point of view and sheds a flood of light on our understanding of Harry's situation; he has been vouchsafed a vision



## Introduction

'to dizzy and appal', and this must be taken into consideration when, in the next section, we come to a consideration of his inmost nature.

### 7. THE FLAWS

In spite of many occasional revivals, *The Family Reunion* has not greatly succeeded with the general public. It asks too much of audiences that do not seem aware how much more they are being given; yet, as I said at first, it has flaws that reach to the heart of it, and these we should consider. The supreme flaw is the daring introduction of the Eumenides as 'the objective correlative' of Harry's guilt and expiation.

Briefly, in whatever way their visitation is contrived, without a previous knowledge of the play they are incomprehensible. In a letter of 18 September, 1939, Eliot wrote to his first cousin, Eleanor Hinkley:

The Furies did not work out very well. It would have been better to have had them invisible to the audience; but in any case this is a piece of machinery which I do not intend to employ again.

This came to be his final opinion. In a lighter mood he had written on 21 February, 1938, to Mrs. Faber:

Your suggestion that the Eumenides should do a strip tease act is novel, and I believe has box-office possibilities. But there is one difficulty. If they don't wear any clothes, how do we distinguish between their evening dress and their travelling costume?

Mr. Martin Browne, the first Director of the play, wrote in answer to a letter of mine, on 25 March, 1967, a reply which he kindly allows me to quote:



## *Introduction*

The main flaw is of course the Eumenides. As presented, they neither speak nor move for a full minute at the two climactic points of the play, and thereby have always destroyed these moments. Apart from their lack of speech, which I agree is catastrophic, they cannot make any movement which does not detract from their intended mysterious grandeur; and WHAT ARE THEY TO LOOK LIKE? In the first draft which I have, the direction for their first appearance is

Evening dress. Black tie.

and on the second

(The Eumenides appear as before, but are now dressed in travelling costume, with luggage, shawls, etc.) These ideas were as you know abandoned before the play saw print or a stage; but they indicate what the original inspiration was.

There is a longish concluding passage on the Eumenides in Eliot's Harvard Lecture, already quoted, which gives in detail the experiments attempted:

. . . I should either have stuck closer to Aeschylus or else taken a great deal more liberty with his myth . . . They must, in future, be omitted from the cast, and be understood to be visible only to certain of my characters, and not to the audience. We tried every possible manner of presenting them. We put them on the stage and they looked like uninvited guests who had strayed in from a fancy dress ball. We concealed them behind gauze, and they suggested a still out of a Walt Disney film. We made them dimmer, and they looked like shrubbery just outside the window: I have seen them signalling from across the garden, or swarming the stage like a football team, and they are never right. They never succeed in being either Greek goddesses or modern spooks.

## Introduction

I cannot feel this to be the right solution, yet it is Eliot's and seems mandatory. He wrote to Martin Browne on May 6, 1949, and said:

Incidentally, I think of removing the Eumenides from the list of characters, so that amateurs will be encouraged to play them invisibly.

Theatre creates its great effects through eyes and ears together; it is the contradiction of its own nature to attempt a great effect *with neither*; and the two 'appearances' of the Eumenides are, by intention, the supreme moments of the play. Twice the audience is gradually worked up for the actual apparition of the mysterious presences of which so much has been said, and twice it is frustrated. How can it be expected to envisage what even the author cannot? Let us take a parallel case in Shakespeare. Often, in foolish deference to bygone scientists who have told them there is no such thing as a ghost, directors of *Macbeth* have cut the Ghost of Banquo out, and left Macbeth gaping at an empty chair; fatuous and ineffective as this is, the audience can at least make shift to imagine Banquo with his throat cut and twenty trenched gashes in his head, because it has seen Banquo alive and heard his corpse described; but how can an audience have a mental image of beings it has never seen, whose appearance has never been described to it, and whose voices it has never heard? Moreover, not to allow the audience to see what Harry sees, and what Mary, Agatha and Downing see, is to withdraw from the audience its power to identify itself with them, and throw it on to the side of the purblind Aunts and Uncles, so often abused in the play for their inability to see anything. There is, of course, Martin Browne's pertinent question to answer: WHAT ARE THEY TO LOOK LIKE? But this is no great problem in an Age that has Henry Moore as its leading

## Introduction

sculptor, and which prides itself on its abstract visual power.

But even to have them designed by such an artist (of whom there are few), and lit by a theatrical magician (of whom there are many), would not be using the whole resources of theatre for these climactic moments. The right, full solution, now too late to propose, would have been for Eliot to have done as he suggests and '*stuck closer to Aeschylus*'. Aeschylus wrote choric poetry of the highest order for his Eumenides to speak or chant — a poetry which expounds who they are, whence they come and what they seek; and this is exactly what the audience pines to know about the Eumenides in *The Family Reunion*. It is true that only a great poet could write such choruses; but a poet who has set out to restore poetry to the stage and has proved his power to do so again and again, in the choruses of *The Rock* and elsewhere, could surely have written something tremendous for them; I use the word in its ancient sense of 'something to be trembled at'.

The second great flaw lies in Harry's character; it is hardly too much to say that he is odious. He is insufferably contemptuous towards his Uncles and Aunts, haranguing them for their insensitiveness, whereas in certain respects he is far more insensitive than they are; for instance the Second Part opens with a scene between him and the kindly Dr. Warburton, a man who had known his father and who deserves the deference that is owed to age and experience; yet, when he tries gently to break to Harry the news that his mother, Amy, is dangerously ill, and that a sudden shock may kill her, Harry who is utterly self-monopolised, rudely replies:

What you have to tell me  
Is either something that I know already  
Or unimportant, or else untrue.



## Introduction

Examples of Harry's arrogance and lack of human feeling can easily be multiplied, but perhaps the worst of all is in his last words to his mother. The audience knows that a shock may kill her; Harry knows it too, yet all he can say by way of farewell to her is

My address, Mother,  
Will be care of the bank in London until you hear from me.  
Good-bye, mother.

(II. iii. 182-3)

'My hero now strikes me' said Eliot in his Harvard Lecture 'as an insufferable prig'; that was in 1950. He was able a few years later, however, to soften this judgment after seeing Mr. Paul Scofield in the part:

I am writing to thank you for what you have done to redeem the part of Harry from the obloquy with which I myself (and, alas, many other people) have covered it. You are, in fact, the first to succeed in giving the impression of a *haunted* man — and if Harry isn't haunted then he is insufferable!

(1956)

### 8. THE ONCE-BORN AND THE TWICE-BORN

Whether we love Harry or loathe him, the intuition that created his character is faultless; it is the very portrait of a certain kind of soul in the throes of religious conversion; this kind of man is vividly described in a masterpiece of psychological study, well-known to Eliot, called *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James, Gifford Lecturer at Edinburgh in 1901-2, brother of Henry James the novelist, also an influence on Eliot.

James distinguishes between two predominant types of



## Introduction

religiously-minded men, those he calls the *Once-Born* or *Healthy-Minded*, and those he calls the *Twice-Born* or the *Sick Souls*, following earlier writers on the subject. The *Once-Born* are those who are of a happy-hearted optimistic turn of thought, who think of God as Love, and see His beauty reflected in the beauty of the world; He is the animating spirit of a harmonious universe; He is beneficent and kind; religion is to take joy in His worship; what the *Once-Born* know of sin and suffering is only a little, and they seem able to shield themselves from being too painfully conscious of it; God will wipe away all tears: 'Well, God's a good man,' says Dogberry; 'He's a good fellow and 'twill all be well,' says Fitzgerald (ironically) in his version of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam; If evil is strong, there is Grace abounding; God's mercy is greater than all His other works, says *Piers Plowman*,

All the wickedness in this world that mankind may work  
or think,  
Is no more, to the mercy of God, than a red cinder in the  
sea.

(B.V.290)

For these, the *Once-Born*, the moment of the rose is more than the moment of the yew, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." These, then, are God's optimists, hearted like children, with a strong, simple, healthy confidence; they are generally inclined (says James) to Catholicism.

Opposite in every way are the *Sick Souls*, or *Twice-Born*; deeply conscious of their own sinfulness and of the sinfulness of the world about them, they tend to prefer punishment to forgiveness, the Day of Judgment to the Beatific Vision, justice to mercy, righteousness to happiness, asceticism to pleasure, Protestantism to Catholicism, Puritanism to either. Of these James writes:

## Introduction

... in its spiritual meaning asceticism stands for nothing less than the essence of the Twice-Born philosophy. It symbolises, lamely enough, no doubt, but sincerely, the belief that there is an element of wrongness in this world, which is neither to be ignored nor evaded, but which must be squarely met and overcome by an appeal to the soul's heroic resources, and neutralised and cleansed away by suffering.

Another but similar account of this type is given in *The Ideas of the Fall and Original Sin* by the late Dr. N. P. Williams (1924), from whom, in this discussion, I have taken many ideas; his work was almost certainly known to Eliot."

But the 'twice-born' man, the 'sick soul', the Augustine or the Bunyan, blessed or cursed from birth with the mysterious heritage of neural and emotional instability, whose passions have been transformed, whose communion with God and peace of mind have been won through the paroxysm of instantaneous conversion, thinks of himself as a 'brand plucked from the burning' by no effort or volition of his own, and of his unconverted nature as saturated with moral evil and intrinsically hateful to God even before and apart from any particular transgression of His law.

Certainly Harry is a sick soul; certainly he passes through a paroxysm of instantaneous conversion; certainly he has a mysterious nervous inheritance from his father's un-love for, and attempts to murder his wife; certainly he sees the world and himself saturated with moral evil, and certainly he departs at the end of the play to seek out some form of asceticism, where the broken stones lie fang up. It a little spoils the effect of his departure that he leaves for the wilderness in a chauffeur-driven motor-car, but I do not think we are meant to mock him for it; his mother says

## Introduction

flatly that he is going to be a missionary; (II. iii. 149)  
Harry objects:

I never said I was going to be a missionary (II. iii. 167).  
But perhaps he is; we are not told. In Eliot's next play, *The Cocktail Party*, another Sick Soul, Celia Coplestone, going through a like conversion, becomes a missionary, and is crucified.

Harry never wins the sympathy won by Celia; his departure leaves a horrible taste in the mouth; but if we think of him in terms of a soul in process of being born again before our eyes, it may help to mitigate the flaw of his dislikableness; we should remember Agatha's words to Downing, the chauffeur:

And, Downing, if his behaviour seems unaccountable

At times, you mustn't worry about that . . .

He sees the world as clearly as you and I see it,

It is only that he has seen a great deal more than that.

(II. iii. 234-8)

After all, Agatha is something of a Twice-Born soul herself.

Yet when all is said for Harry, haunted, Twice-Born, sick in soul as he may be, he remains graceless and dislikable, thinking only of himself and his family guilt and his sense of defilement. His sin of pride is as monstrous as his lack of love; he sneers at his uncles and his brothers; he is brutally lacking in imagination for the rest — there is never a word of sympathy from him for the wife he claims to have murdered, or for the pitiable horror of her death, her last instants of sinking, alone and helpless, in the cold Atlantic night; he feels no sorrow, he expresses no repentance, asks no forgiveness; he remains under the curse of lovelessness, of hardness of heart, even in the 'paroxysm of conversion'. It may well be that this is true to type, but it is not a type to endear itself to an audience, still less to win one to Christian understanding; all we hear of is guilt



## Introduction

and expiation; Harry might never have heard of the New Testament or listened to the Lord's Prayer; he twice speaks of the past as 'unredeemable' (I. i. 314 and I. iii. 74) as if the Redemption (which, in *The Rock*, gave meaning to Time\*) had never happened. Of course *we only see Harry for three hours out of his whole life*; that is one of the disadvantages of writing a neo-classical play, in obedience to the 'Unities';" everything happens between tea and bedtime; he has to be in the same tense mood throughout. Yet if he could somehow have suggested some touch of contrition in the matter of his unhappy wife, or of generous feeling towards his mother, one might be ready to believe him capable of the programme he outlines for his future. He can be imagined, easily enough, 'Somewhere on the other side of despair' and even able to 'worship in the desert' before 'a stony sanctuary and a primitive altar', but will he be capable of

'A care over lives of humble people'?

(II. ii. 330-4)

I do not find it easy to believe; however, we only see him in the earliest moments of a new life, taking his first steps in an unknown direction; he leaves us feeling that he still has much to learn and far to go; perhaps the crooked will be made straight; but our sympathies stay with Amy. In a letter of 4 July 1955, Eliot wrote to Mr. Hugh Beaumont:

I might take this opportunity, however, of pointing out that I consider the role of Amy in this play of equal importance with the role of Harry: in fact as I have come in retrospect to understand the play better than I did when I wrote it, I now find that the play is not so much the comedy of Harry Monchensey as the tragedy of his mother.

There is a third reason why this deep and powerful play fails of its full effect; the gathering clouds of the First Part

## Introduction

loom up dark, coppery and threatening, and there is distant thunder; but the thunder comes no nearer, we never feel the imminence overhead, and the flash, that should tear the sky across, never happens. Wishwood has a lightning-conductor that Argos lacks; in Argos the lightning really strikes and strikes again: Agamemnon is truly murdered, and so are Cassandra, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. But in Wishwood there are no corpses, no murders, no murderers; the crimes are never *actualised*. We are expressly given the comfortable reassurance that Harry's father, considered as a murderer, was utterly incompetent — 'He would have bungled it' (II. ii. 110). Even Agatha could have done better. And Harry is as genteel as his father; the stuff of murder is in neither of them. Civilised drawing-rooms have perhaps drained it out of them; there is no *brutality* in the situation such as there is even in the murder described in *Sweeney Agonistes*:

*Sweeney* Well he kept her there in a bath

With a gallon of lysol in a bath

*Swarts* These fellows always get pinched in the end.

*Snow* Excuse me, they don't all get pinched in the end.

What about them bones on Epsom Heath?

There are no bones, no lysol at Wishwood, only the tenuous temptation to kill.

It is no doubt morally, and rationally, and notionally true that to commit adultery or murder in the heart is as guilty an act as to perform it in the flesh; but believe it as we may, we do not *feel* it so; for it lacks ultimate poignancy, that despair hit on by Lady Macbeth in her simple sentence

What's done cannot be undone.

In *The Family Reunion* we are cushioned from this, so

## Introduction

we leave the theatre with a mixture of disappointment and relief. We have not been put through it after all; in the 'perpetual struggle between Good and Evil' we have felt no real contact with either. Harry fails in evil as Agatha fails in goodness; they remain well-bred, negative puritans; Agatha has achieved a painful detachment from the love of created beings, but where is there an affirmation, or even a sense of possession by a 'divine union'? Where is the love of God?

Harry has either let 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would', or has let 'I would' wait upon 'I won't', taking extra care to prevent the thing he longed for:

... he seemed very anxious about my Lady.  
Tried to keep her in when the weather was rough,  
Didn't like to see her lean over the rail.

(I. i. 521-3)

He has neither the ferocity of a Clytemnestra nor the hunger for right action of an Orestes. As he is not sorry for his supposed murder, he gets no pity; as he is not murderous, there is no terror. A colourless sinner, he gets the Eumenides he deserves, Eumenides of the drawing-room. Downing calls them '*ghosts*' (II. iii. 244) and ghosts they are, ghosts of ghosts, ever speechless and at last invisible. It is said that when Aeschylus' trilogy was first performed in Athens, so terrible in looks, voice and action were the Eumenides, that a pregnant woman seated in the audience gave birth to her child at their first appearance. But here such things can no longer happen. The ritual of the drawing-room has proved stronger than that of the Eumenides, and has banished them from the stage.

Nevertheless Eliot has not failed in his central purposes; he has brought poetry into the world in which the audience lives; he has renewed through his drama a sense of our involvement with a supernatural order; he has created a



## Introduction

language and a kind of imagery sufficient, or almost sufficient, for his task out of everyday conversation, and a generation of dramatists has succeeded him that has had 'the benefit of our experience'. His work has loosened up the hostility of London theatre audiences to poetry and to the 'overwhelming questions' that need to be asked on the stage as elsewhere, and helped to make the way possible for other great achievements in poetry and drama, such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. No two poets could have more different or more distinctive styles and things to say, but both are poets speaking to us in a theatre, in language we accept as our own, about our mortal predicament. It was Eliot who led the way in this.

### 9. THE VERSE

In my opinion, though not in his, Eliot had always known how to write dramatic verse, and could make living language of it, whether in blank verse, jazz verse, non-syllabic verse or verse on the borderland of prose. The author of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* is obviously a master of rhythm and expression. For his power in a Shakespearean — and yet a perfectly twentieth-century — manner, let us take a famous passage in the *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, beginning

No, I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be . . .

It is splendid talking stuff, ready for any actor, in a situation not difficult to imagine — a twentieth-century Osric in dialogue with a twentieth-century Guildenstern, for instance.

For jazz verse there is the masterly rock and roll of *Sweeney Agonistes* and its attendant lyrics; for non-syllabic verse — verse whose rhythmic patterns do not depend on the number of syllables in a given line — there

## Introduction

are the Choruses from *The Rock*, and for verse which seems to cross the borderland into plain prose there are passages like that in *The Waste Land*, recording the advice Lil's friend had given to Lil, together with the background voice of the ominous barman who speaks in block capitals:

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said —

I didn't mince my words. I said to her myself,

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.

He'll want to know what you done with that money he  
gave you

To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there . . .

A writer with such a range of self-created natural styles has nothing to learn (one would think) in the idioms of poetic drama.

Yet Eliot called for a break with the past, a return to the roughnesses of conversation, to energise rhythms worn too smooth by the supreme Victorian mastery of Tennyson. He began setting to work on his ambitious task (so he tells us) when he started on the Choruses in *The Rock*; two letters support this, the first to Professor Bonamy Dobrée, dated 12 April 1939:

I am by no means sure about the chorus: I mean whether I shall look on it as a permanent element for the future, or whether it is a vestige, something the employment of which has been a help to *me* in finding the way from non-dramatic to dramatic verse.

The second is to Mr. Martin Browne, who, with the Rev. R. Webb-Odell, wrote the scenario for *The Rock*; it is dated 1 April, 1959:

THE ROCK gave me a great push forward when we were working on it, as it was my first opportunity to write for the stage at all.

## Introduction

The Choruses from *The Rock* are the finest choric speeches in English drama since those in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. After *The Family Reunion*, however, Eliot made use of a Chorus no more.

Bearing these things in mind, we may now turn to the autobiographical manifesto in the matter of verse-writing for the stage offered by Eliot in his famous lecture, *The Use of Poetry in Drama*, from which I have already quoted.

No play, he says, should be written in verse if prose is *dramatically* adequate for it; the play and the language of a play are not two separate things, but organically at one; poetry is functional, not a mere decoration; the audience should be too intent upon the whole experience to be conscious of the medium; what is needed is an elastic form of verse in which everything can be said, whether it be prosaic or poetic in tone; it must be able to accommodate a rising intensity of which poetry is the natural utterance, and yet 'say homely things without bathos'.

When he set himself to the writing of *Murder in the Cathedral*, he could not use a distinctively modern idiom because it would have been inappropriate to the remote past which he had to evoke; on the other hand to return to the archaic language of the past, even if he had known Norman French and Anglo-Saxon, would have been impossible. His style, therefore, had to be *neutral*, neither committed to past or present. Above all it must not echo Shakespeare, because the rhythm of blank verse was too remote from modern speech; it could no longer give the effect of conversation, an effect absolutely necessary to drama, which is an art made out of people talking to each other. There had been too many failures, even by great poets, in the attempt to imitate Shakespeare.

Eliot turned to an older model for his verse-forms, the anonymous late-mediaeval *Everyman*, as a first experiment; it gave him the idea of 'an avoidance of too much



## Introduction

iambic' (Shakespeare's metre) 'some use of alliteration, and occasional unexpected rhyme'; his experiments evolved into the versification of *Murder in the Cathedral*. But this he did not regard as more than a way of avoiding what had to be avoided; it solved the problem for that play only.

I determined, therefore, in my next play to take a theme of contemporary life, with characters of our own time living in our own world. *The Family Reunion* was the result. Here my first concern was the problem of the versification, to find a rhythm close to contemporary speech, in which the stresses could be made to come wherever we should naturally put them . . . What I worked out is substantially what I have continued to employ: a line of varying length and varying number of syllables, with a caesura and three stresses. The caesura and the stresses may come at different places, almost anywhere in the line; the stresses may be close together or separated by light syllables; the only rule being that there must be one stress on one side of the caesura and two on the other.

No two people use precisely the same cadences in speech, or talk to quite the same tunes; even the same speaker may vary his ways of speaking the same sentence. It is particularly noticeable as between one generation and the next; accentuation, tone and tempo undergo infinitesimal evolutions; a gramophone record of Ellen Terry, (1848-1928) one of the best and most natural speakers of verse of her time, now sounds old-fashioned and, to some ears, affected. Yet her utterance was sincerity itself to her contemporaries. A feeling, then, for how to say a line is partly a matter of era and partly of private idiosyncrasy; in any case the means we have of marking a stressed syllable in print are very crude; to use accents or italics grossly distorts the subtleties of accentuation of which the voice is

## Introduction

capable. It is not difficult, however, to give a rough indication, and show examples of Eliot's declared technique:

That apprehension // *deeper than all sense*  
Deeper than the sense of *smell* // but *like a smell*  
In that it is indescribable // a *sweet and bitter* smell

Yet, to my ear, the lines that follow do not obey 'the only rule' he speaks of, and seem to ask four and even five stresses, not three, upon occasion:

From *another world* // I *know* it, I *know* it!  
More *potent* than *ever before* // a *vapour* dissolving  
All *other* worlds, and *me into* it. // O *Mary*!  
*Don't* look at me like *that!*- // *Stop!* // *Try* to stop it!  
(I. ii. 291-97)

Let us take a longer example from an even more passionate part of the play:

The *more rapacious* // to *take* what I *never had*;  
The *more unpardonable*, // to *taunt* me with not *having* it.  
Had you *taken* what I *had*, // you would have left me at  
*least a memory*  
Of *something* to *live* upon. // You *knew* that you took  
*everything*  
Except the *walls*, // the *furniture* // the *acres*;  
*Leaving nothing* — // but what I could *breed* for myself,  
What I could *plant here*. // *Seven years* I *kept* him,  
For the sake of the *future*, // a *discontented ghost*  
In his *own house*. // *What* of the *humiliation*,  
Of the *chilly pretences* in the *silent bedroom*, (no caesura)  
*Forcing sons* // upon an *unwilling father*?  
*Dare you think* what that *does* to one? // *Try* to think of it.  
(II. iii. 11-22)

Readers will already, no doubt, have disagreed with some of my accentuations. They look so heavy in print; in

## Introduction

another mood I may disagree myself; but the experiment at least demonstrates that Eliot's practice is more flexible than his theory, except in one point — that this passionate language gives the sound of natural conversation, though it is more than that; it is poetry too.

Eliot also makes the experiment of choral speech, of lyrical verse-duet and of ritual utterance. To my ear, these are generally more strongly stressed than the more conversational dialogue; perhaps four voices need more points of stress to keep them together in rhythmic unison:

In an *old house* there is *always listening* // and *more* is  
heard than *spoken*.

And what is *spoken* remains in the *room*, // waiting for  
the *future* to *hear* it.

And whatever *happens* began in the *past*, // and presses  
*hard* on the *future*.

The *agony* in the *curtained bedroom*, // whether of *birth*  
or of *dying*,

*Gathers* into itself all the *voices* of the *past* // and projects  
them into the *future*.

(II. i. 409–413)

It is best to lay down no rules at all, and simply to speak the lines the way they fall, in whatever seems the natural cadence that gives fullest meaning. It will be noticed that almost every line is end-stopped — the sense pauses; yet in some cases the sense flows on into the next:

The wind and rain had not shaken your father  
Awake yet. I found him thinking  
How to get rid of your mother.

(II. ii. 101–3)

Although, as I have said, no rule need be laid down, it may be worth recording that Miss Cathleen Nesbitt told me she was greatly helped in playing the part of Julia in *The*



## *Introduction*

*Cocktail Party*, when Eliot said to her that a pause, however infinitesimal, was generally intended at the end of a line, even when the sense ran on. In the lines I have just quoted, for instance, a slight pause after 'father' and 'thinking' can give the effect that the speaker (Agatha) is groping for words, tender yet clear enough to be spoken of the man she loved.

# The Family Reunion

---

## Part I

The drawing-room, after tea  
An afternoon in late March

\*

### *Persons*

AMY, DOWAGER LADY MONCHENSEY

IVY, VIOLET *and* AGATHA,

*her younger sisters*

COL. THE HON. GERALD PIPER, *and* THE

HON. CHARLES PIPER,

*brothers of her deceased husband*

MARY,

*daughter of a deceased cousin of Lady Monchensey*

DENMAN, *a parlourmaid*

HARRY, LORD MONCHENSEY, *Amy's eldest son*

DOWNING, *his servant and chauffeur*

DR. WARBURTON

SERGEANT WINCHELL

THE EUMENIDES

\*

*The scene is laid in a country house in the  
North of England*

Call No. \_\_\_\_\_

# DATE SLIP

"This book was issued from the Library on the date  
it stamped. A fine of **10 Paise** will be charged for  
each day the book is kept over - due".

[illegible]



## Scene I

AMY, IVY, VIOLET, AGATHA, GERALD  
CHARLES, MARY

DENMAN *enters to draw the curtains\**

AMY\*

Not yet! I will ring for you. It is still quite light.  
I have nothing to do but watch the days draw out.  
Now that I sit in the house from October to June,  
And the swallow comes too soon and the spring will be  
over

And the cuckoo will be gone before I am out again.  
O Sun, that was once so warm, O Light that was taken  
for granted

When I was young and strong, and sun and light unsought  
for

And the night unfeared and the day expected  
And the clocks could be trusted, tomorrow assured  
And time would not stop in the dark!

Put on the lights. But leave the curtains undrawn.  
Make up the fire. Will the spring never come? I am cold.

AGATHA

Wishwood was always a cold place, Amy.

IVY\*

I have always told Amy she should go south in the winter.  
Were I in Amy's position, I would go south in the winter.

## *The Family Reunion*

I would follow the sun, not wait for the sun to come here.  
I would go south in the winter, if I could afford it,  
Not freeze, as I do, in Bayswater, by a gas-fire counting  
shillings.

VIOLET\*

20 Go south! to the English circulating libraries,  
To the military widows and the English chaplains,  
To the chilly deck-chair and the strong cold tea —  
The strong cold stewed bad Indian tea.

CHARLES\*

That's not Amy's style at all. We are country-bred people.  
Amy has been too long used to our ways  
Living with horses and dogs and guns  
Ever to want to leave England in the winter.  
But a single man like me is better off in London:  
A man can be very cosy at his club  
Even in an English winter.

GERALD\*

30 Well, as for me,  
I'd just as soon be a subaltern again  
To be back in the East. An incomparable climate  
For a man who can exercise a little common prudence;  
And your servants look after you very much better.

AMY

My servants are perfectly competent, Gerald.  
I can still see to that.

VIOLET

Well, as for me,  
I would never go south, no, definitely never,  
Even could I do it as well as Amy:

## *The Family Reunion*

England's bad enough, I would never go south,  
Simply to see the vulgarest people —  
You can keep out of their way at home;  
People with money from heaven knows where —

40

GERALD

Dividends from aeroplane shares.

VIOLET

They bathe all day and they dance all night  
In the absolute *minimum* of clothes.

CHARLES

It's the cocktail-drinking does the harm:  
There's nothing on earth so bad for the young.  
All that a civilised person needs  
Is a glass of dry sherry or two before dinner.  
The modern young people don't know what they're  
drinking,

Modern young people don't care what they're eating;  
They've lost their sense of taste and smell  
Because of their cocktails and cigarettes.

50

[*Enter DENMAN with sherry and whisky. CHARLES takes  
sherry and GERALD whisky.*]

That's what it comes to.

[*Lights a cigarette.*]

IVY

The younger generation  
Are undoubtedly decadent.

CHARLES

The younger generation  
Are not what we were. Haven't the stamina,  
Haven't the sense of responsibility.



## *The Family Reunion*

GERALD

You're being very hard on the younger generation.  
I don't come across them very much now, myself;  
But I must say I've met some very decent specimens  
And some first-class shots — better than you were,  
60 Charles, as I remember. Besides, you've got to make  
allowances:

We haven't left them such an easy world to live in.  
Let the younger generation speak for itself:  
It's Mary's generation. What does she think about it?

MARY

Really, Cousin Gerald, if you want information  
About the younger generation, you must ask someone  
else.

I'm afraid that I don't deserve the compliment:  
I don't belong to any generation.\*

[*Exit.*]

VIOLET

Really, Gerald, I must say you're very tactless,  
And I think that Charles might have been more con-  
siderate.

GERALD

70 I'm very sorry: but why was she upset?  
I only meant to draw her into the conversation.

CHARLES

She's a nice girl; but it's a difficult age for her.  
I suppose she must be getting on for thirty?  
She ought to be married, that's what it is.

AMY

So she should have been, if things had gone as I intended.  
Harry's return does not make things easy for her

## *The Family Reunion*

At the moment: but life may still go right.\*  
Meanwhile, let us drop the subject. The less said the better.

GERALD

That reminds me, Amy,  
When are the boys all due to arrive?

80

AMY

I do not want the clock to stop in the dark.  
If you want to know why I never leave Wishwood  
That is the reason. I keep Wishwood alive  
To keep the family alive, to keep them together,  
To keep me alive, and I live to keep them.  
You none of you understand how old you are  
And death will come to you as a mild surprise,  
A momentary shudder in a vacant room.  
Only Agatha seems to discover some meaning in death  
Which I cannot find.

90

— I am only certain of Arthur and John,  
Arthur in London, John in Leicestershire:  
They should both be here in good time for dinner.  
Harry telephoned to me from Marseilles,  
He would come by air to Paris, and so to London,  
And hoped to arrive in the course of the evening.

VIOLET

Harry was always the most likely to be late.

AMY

This time, it will not be his fault.  
We are very lucky to have Harry at all.\*

IVY

And when will you have your birthday cake, Amy,  
And open your presents?

100

## *The Family Reunion*

AMY

After dinner:

That is the best time.

IVY

It is the first time

You have not had your cake and your presents at tea.

AMY

This is a very particular occasion

As you ought to know. It will be the first time

For eight years that we have all been together.

AGATHA

It is going to be rather painful for Harry

After eight years and all that has happened

To come back to Wishwood.

GERALD

Why, painful?

VIOLET

110 Gerald! you know what Agatha means.\*

AGATHA

I mean painful, because everything is irrevocable,\*

Because the past is irremediable,

Because the future can only be built

Upon the real past. Wandering in the tropics

Or against the painted scene of the Mediterranean

Harry must often have remembered Wishwood —

The nursery tea, the school holiday,

The daring feats on the old pony,

And thought to creep back through the little door.

120 He will find a new Wishwood. Adaptation is hard.



## *The Family Reunion*

AMY

Nothing is changed, Agatha, at Wishwood.  
Everything is kept as it was when he left it,  
Except the old pony, and the mongrel setter  
Which I had to have destroyed.  
Nothing has been changed. I have seen to that.

AGATHA

Yes. I mean that at Wishwood he will find another Harry.\*  
The man who returns will have to meet  
The boy who left. Round by the stables,  
In the coach-house, in the orchard,  
In the plantation, down the corridor  
That led to the nursery, round the corner  
Of the new wing, he will have to face him —  
And it will not be a very *jolly* corner.\*  
When the loop in time comes — and it does not come for  
everybody —  
The hidden is revealed, and the spectres show themselves.\*

130

GERALD

I don't in the least know what you're talking about.  
You seem to be wanting to give us all the hump.  
I must say, this isn't cheerful for Amy's birthday  
Or for Harry's homecoming. Make him feel at home, I  
say!

Make him feel that what has happened doesn't matter.  
He's taken his medicine, I've no doubt.  
Let him marry again and carry on at Wishwood.

140

AMY

Thank you, Gerald. Though Agatha means  
As a rule, a good deal more than she cares to betray,  
I am bound to say that I agree with you.

## *The Family Reunion*

CHARLES

I never wrote to him when he lost his wife —  
That was just about a year ago, wasn't it?  
Do you think that I ought to mention it now?  
It seems to me too late.

AMY

Much too late.

150 If he wants to talk about it, that's another matter;  
But I don't believe he will. He will wish to forget it.  
I do not mince matters in front of the family:  
You can call it nothing but a blessed relief.

VIOLET

I call it providential.

IVY

Yet it must have been shocking,  
Especially to lose anybody in *that* way —  
Swept off the deck in the middle of a storm,  
And never even to recover the body.

CHARLES

'Well-known Peeress Vanishes from Liner'.

GERALD

Yes, it's odd to think of her as permanently *missing*.

VIOLET

160 Had she been drinking?

AMY

I would never ask him.

IVY

These things are much better not enquired into.  
She may have done it in a fit of temper.

# *The Family Reunion*

GERALD

I never met her.

AMY

I am very glad you did not.\*

I am very glad that none of you ever met her.  
It will make the situation very much easier  
And is why I was so anxious you should all be here.  
She never would have been one of the family,  
She never wished to be one of the family,  
She only wanted to keep him to herself  
To satisfy her vanity. That's why she dragged him  
All over Europe and half round the world  
To expensive hotels and undesirable society  
Which she could choose herself. She never wanted  
Harry's relations or Harry's old friends;  
She never wanted to fit herself to Harry,  
But only to bring Harry down to her own level.  
A restless shivering painted shadow  
In life, she is less than a shadow in death.  
You might as well all of you know the truth  
For the sake of the future. There can be no grief  
And no regret and no remorse.  
I would have prevented it if I could. For the sake of the  
future:

170

180

Harry is to take command at Wishwood  
And I hope we can contrive his future happiness.  
Do not discuss his absence. Please behave only  
As if nothing had happened in the last eight years.

GERALD

That will be a little difficult.

VIOLET

Nonsense, Gerald!

You must see for yourself it's the only thing to do.



# *The Family Reunion*

AGATHA

Thus with most careful devotion\*  
190 Thus with precise attention  
To detail, interfering preparation  
Of that which is already prepared  
Men tighten the knot of confusion  
Into perfect misunderstanding,  
Reflecting a pocket-torch of observation  
Upon each other's opacity  
Neglecting all the admonitions  
From the world around the corner  
The wind's talk in the dry holly-tree  
200 The inclination of the moon  
The attraction of the dark passage  
The paw under the door.

CHORUS

(IVY, VIOLET, GERALD *and* CHARLES)

Why do we feel embarrassed, impatient, fretful, ill at  
ease,

Assembled like amateur actors who have not been as-  
signed their parts?

Like amateur actors in a dream when the curtain rises, to  
find themselves dressed for a different play, or having  
rehearsed the wrong parts,

Waiting for the rustling in the stalls, the titter in the dress  
circle, the laughter and catcalls in the gallery?

CHARLES

I might have been in St. James's Street, in a comfortable  
chair rather nearer the fire.

IVY

I might have been visiting Cousin Lily at Sidmouth, if I  
had not had to come to this party.

## *The Family Reunion*

GERALD

I might have been staying with Compton-Smith, down at his place in Dorset.

VIOLET

I should have been helping Lady Bumpus, at the Vicar's American Tea.

210

CHORUS

Yet we are here at Amy's command, to play an unread part in some monstrous farce, ridiculous in some nightmare pantomime.

AMY

What's that? I thought I saw someone pass the window. What time is it?

CHARLES

Nearly twenty to seven.

AMY

John should be here now, he has the shortest way to come.

John at least, if not Arthur. Hark, there is someone coming:

Yes, it must be John.

[*Enter HARRY.*]

Harry!

[*HARRY stops suddenly at the door and stares at the window.*]\*

IVY

Welcome, Harry!

GERALD

Well done!

# *The Family Reunion*

VIOLET

Welcome home to Wishwood!

CHARLES

220 Why, what's the matter?

AMY

Harry, if you want the curtains drawn you should let me ring for Denman.

HARRY

How can you sit in this blaze of light for all the world to look at?

If you knew how you looked, when I saw you through the window!

Do you like to be stared at by eyes through a window?\*

AMY

You forget, Harry, that you are at Wishwood,  
Not in town, where you have to close the blinds.  
There is no one to see you but our servants who belong  
here,

And who all want to see you back, Harry.

HARRY

Look there, look there: do you see them?

GERALD

230 No, I don't see anyone about.

HARRY

No, no, not there. Look there!

Can't you see them? *You* don't see them, but I see them,  
And they see me. This is the first time that I have seen  
them.



## *The Family Reunion*

In the Java Straits, in the Sunda Sea,\*  
In the sweet sickly tropical night, I knew they were  
coming.

In Italy, from behind the nightingale's thicket,  
The eyes stared at me, and corrupted that song.\*  
Behind the palm trees in the Grand Hotel  
They were always there. But I did not *see* them.  
Why should they wait until I came back to Wishwood?  
There were a thousand places where I might have met  
them!

240

Why here? why here?

Many happy returns of the day, mother.\*  
Aunt Ivy, Aunt Violet, Uncle Gerald, Uncle Charles,  
Agatha.

### AMY

We are very glad to have you back, Harry.  
Now we shall all be together for dinner.  
The servants have been looking forward to your coming:  
Would you like to have them in after dinner  
Or wait till tomorrow? I am sure you must be tired.  
You will find everybody here, and everything the same.  
Mr. Bevan — you remember — wants to call tomorrow  
On some legal business, a question about taxes —  
But I think you would rather wait till you are rested.  
Your room is all ready for you. Nothing has been  
changed.

250

### HARRY

Changed? nothing changed? how can you say that  
nothing is changed?  
You all look so withered and young.\*

### GERALD

We must have a ride tomorrow.  
You'll find you know the country as well as ever.

## *The Family Reunion*

'There wasn't an inch of it you didn't know.  
But you'll have to see about a couple of new hunters.

CHARLES

And I've a new wine merchant to recommend you;  
Your cellar could do with a little attention.

IVY

260 And you'll really have to find a successor to old Hawkins.  
It's really high time the old man was pensioned.  
He's let the rock garden go to rack and ruin,  
And he's nearly half blind. I've spoken to your mother  
Time and time again: she's done nothing about it  
Because she preferred to wait for your coming.

VIOLET

And time and time again I have spoken to your mother  
About the waste that goes on in the kitchen.  
Mrs. Packell is too old to know what she is doing.  
It really needs a man in charge of things at Wishwood.

AMY

270 You see your aunts and uncles are very helpful, Harry.  
I have always found them forthcoming with advice  
Which I have never taken. Now it is your business.  
I have only struggled to keep Wishwood going  
And to make no changes before your return.  
Now it's for you to manage. I am an old woman.  
They can give me no further advice when I'm dead.

IVY

Oh, dear Amy!  
No one wants you to die, I'm sure!  
Now that Harry's back, is the time to think of living.

## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

Time and time and time, and change, no change!  
You all of you try to talk as if nothing had happened,  
And yet you are talking of nothing else.\* Why not get to  
the point

280

Or if you want to pretend that I am another person—  
A person that you have conspired to invent, please do so  
In my absence. I shall be less embarrassing to you.

Agatha?

AGATHA

I think, Harry, that having got so far—  
If you want no pretences, let us have no pretences:  
And you must try at once to make us understand,  
And we must try to understand you.

HARRY

But how can I explain, how can I explain to *you*?  
You will understand less after I have explained it.  
All that I could hope to make you understand  
Is only events: not what has happened.\*  
And people to whom nothing has ever happened  
Cannot understand the unimportance of events.

290

GERALD

Well, you can't say that nothing has happened to *me*.  
I started as a youngster on the North-West Frontier—  
Been in tight corners most of my life  
And some pretty nasty messes.

CHARLES

And there isn't much would surprise me, Harry;  
Or shock me, either.

300



## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

You are all people

To whom nothing has happened, at most a continual  
impact

Of external events. You have gone through life in sleep,  
Never woken to the nightmare.\* I tell you, life would be  
unendurable

If you were wide awake. You do not know  
The noxious smell untraceable in the drains,  
Inaccessible to the plumbers,\* that has its hour of the  
night; you do not know

The unspoken voice of sorrow in the ancient bedroom  
At three o'clock in the morning. I am not speaking

310 Of my own experience, but trying to give you  
Comparisons in a more familiar medium. I am the old  
house\*

With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning,  
In which all past is present, all degradation  
Is unredeemable. As for what happens—\*  
Of the past you can only see what is past,  
Not what is always present. That is what matters.

AGATHA

Nevertheless, Harry, best tell us as you can:  
Talk in your own language, without stopping to debate  
Whether it may be too far beyond our understanding.

HARRY

320 The sudden solitude in a crowded desert  
In a thick smoke, many creatures moving  
Without direction, for no direction  
Leads anywhere but round and round in that vapour  
Without purpose, and without principle of conduct  
In flickering intervals of light and darkness;  
The partial anæsthesia of suffering without feeling\*

## *The Family Reunion*

And partial observation of one's own automatism  
While the slow stain sinks deeper through the skin  
Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone —  
This is what matters, but it is unspeakable,  
Untranslatable: I talk in general terms  
Because the particular has no language.\* One thinks to  
escape

330

By violence, but one is still alone  
In an over-crowded desert, jostled by ghosts.  
It was only reversing the senseless direction\*  
For a momentary rest on the burning wheel  
That cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic  
When I pushed her over.\*

VIOLET  
Pushed her?

HARRY

You would never imagine anyone could sink so quickly.\*  
I had always supposed, wherever I went  
That she would be with me; whatever I did  
That she was unkillable. It was not like that.  
Everything is true in a different sense.\*  
I expected to find her when I went back to the cabin.  
Later, I became excited, I think I made enquiries;  
The purser and the steward were extremely sympathetic  
And the doctor very attentive.  
That night I slept heavily, alone.

340

AMY  
Harry!

CHARLES

You mustn't indulge such dangerous fancies.  
It's only doing harm to your mother and yourself.

350

## *The Family Reunion*

Of course we know what really happened, we read it in  
the papers —

No need to revert to it. Remember, my boy,  
I understand, your life together made it seem more  
horrible.

There's a lot in my own past life that presses on my  
chest

When I wake, as I do now, early before morning.  
I understand these feelings better than you know —  
But *you* have no reason to reproach yourself.  
Your conscience can be clear.

HARRY

It goes a good deal deeper\*  
Than what people call their conscience; it is just the  
cancer

360 That eats away the self. I knew how you would take it.  
First of all, you isolate the single event  
As something so dreadful that it couldn't have happened,  
Because you could not bear it. So you must believe  
That I suffer from delusions. It is not my conscience,  
Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to  
live in.

— I lay two days in contented drowsiness;  
Then I recovered. I am afraid of sleep:  
A condition in which one can be caught for the last time.  
And also waking. She is nearer than ever.

370 The contamination has reached the marrow  
And *they* are always near. Here, nearer than ever.  
They are very close here. I had not expected that.

AMY

Harry, Harry, you are very tired  
And overwrought. Coming so far  
And making such haste, the change is too sudden for you.



## *The Family Reunion*

You are unused to our foggy climate  
And the northern country. When you see Wishwood  
Again by day, all will be the same again.  
I beg you to go now and rest before dinner.  
Get Downing to draw you a hot bath,\*  
And you will feel better.

380

### AGATHA

There are certain points I do not yet understand:  
They will be clear later. I am also convinced  
That you only hold a fragment of the explanation.  
It is only because of what you do not understand  
That you feel the need to declare what you do.  
There is more to understand: hold fast to that  
As the way to freedom.

### HARRY

I think I see what you mean,  
Dimly — as you once explained the sobbing in the chimney\*

The evil in the dark closet, which they said was not  
there,

Which they explained away, but you explained them  
Or at least, made me cease to be afraid of them.

I will go and have my bath.

390

[Exit.]

### GERALD

God preserve us!

I never thought it would be as bad as this.

### VIOLET

There is only one thing to be done:  
Harry must see a doctor.

## *The Family Reunion*

IVY

But I understand —

I have heard of such cases before — that people in his  
condition

Often betray the most immoderate resentment

At such a suggestion. They can be very cunning —

400 Their malady makes them so. They do not want to be  
cured

And they know what you are thinking.

CHARLES

He has probably let this notion grow in his mind,\*

Living among strangers, with no one to talk to.

I suspect it is simply that the wish to get rid of her

Makes him believe he did. He cannot trust his good  
fortune.

I believe that all he needs is someone to talk to,

To get it off his mind. I'll have a talk to him tomorrow.

AMY

Most certainly not, Charles, you are not the right person.

I prefer to believe that a few days at Wishwood

410 Among his own family, is all that he needs.

GERALD

Nevertheless, Amy, there's something in Violet's sug-  
gestion.

Why not ring up Warburton, and ask him to join us?

He's an old friend of the family, it's perfectly natural

That he should be asked. He looked after all the boys

When they were children. I'll have a word with him.

He can talk to Harry, and Harry need have no suspicion.

I'd trust Warburton's opinion.

## *The Family Reunion*

AMY

If anyone speaks to Dr. Warburton  
It should be myself. What does Agatha think?

AGATHA

It seems a necessary move\*  
In an unnecessary action,  
Not for the good that it will do  
But that nothing may be left undone  
On the margin of the impossible.

420

AMY

Very well.

I will ring up the doctor myself.

[Exit.]

CHARLES

Meanwhile, I have an idea. Why not question Downing?  
He's been with Harry ten years, he's absolutely discreet.  
He was with them on the boat. He might be of use.

IVY

Charles! you don't really suppose  
That he might have pushed her over?

CHARLES

In any case, I shouldn't blame Harry.  
I might have done the same thing once, myself.  
Nobody knows what he's likely to do  
Until there's somebody he wants to get rid of.

430

GERALD

Even so, we don't want Downing to know  
Any more than he knows already.  
And even if he knew, it's very much better



## *The Family Reunion*

That he shouldn't know that we knew it also.  
Why not let sleeping dogs lie?

CHARLES

All the same, there's a question or two  
[*Rings the bell.*]

440 That I'd like to ask Downing.

He shan't know why I'm asking.

[*Enter DENMAN.*]

Denman, where is Downing? Is he up with his Lordship?

DENMAN

He's out in the garage, Sir, with his Lordship's car.

CHARLES

Tell him I'd like to have a word with him, please.

[*Exit DENMAN.*]

VIOLET

Charles, if you are determined upon this investigation,  
Which I am convinced is going to lead us nowhere,  
And which I am sure Amy would disapprove of —  
I only wish to express my emphatic protest  
Both against your purpose and the means you are  
employing.

CHARLES

My purpose is, to find out what's wrong with Harry:  
450 Until we know that, we can do nothing for him.  
And as for my means, we can't afford to be squeamish  
In taking hold of anything that comes to hand.  
If you are interested in helping Harry  
You can hardly object to the means.

VIOLET

I do object.

## *The Family Reunion*

IVY

And I wish to associate myself with my sister  
In her objections —

AGATHA

I have no objection,  
Any more than I object to asking Dr. Warburton:  
I only see that this is all quite irrelevant;  
We had better leave Charles to talk to Downing  
And pursue his own methods.

460

[*Rises.*]

VIOLET

I do not agree.  
I think there should be witnesses. I intend to remain.  
And I wish to be present to hear what Downing says.  
I want to know at once, not be told about it later.

IVY

And I shall stay with Violet.

AGATHA

I shall return  
When Downing has left you.

[*Exit.*]

CHARLES

Well, I'm very sorry  
You all see it like this: but there simply are times  
When there's nothing to do but take the bull by the horns,  
And this is one.

[*Knock: and enter DOWNING.*]\*

CHARLES

Good evening, Downing.  
It's good to see you again, after all these years.  
You're well, I hope?

470

# *The Family Reunion*

DOWNING

Thank you, very well indeed, Sir.

CHARLES

I'm sorry to send for you so abruptly.

But I've a question I'd like to put to you

I'm sure you won't mind, it's about his Lordship.

You've looked after his Lordship for over ten years . . .

DOWNING

Eleven years, Sir, next Lady Day.

CHARLES

Eleven years, and you know him pretty well.

And I'm sure that you've been a good friend to him, too.

*We* haven't seen him for nearly eight years;

And to tell the truth, now that we've seen him,

480 We're a little worried about his health.

He doesn't seem to be . . . quite himself.

DOWNING

Quite natural, if I may say so, Sir,

After what happened.

CHARLES

Quite so, quite.

Downing, you were with them on the voyage from  
New York —

We didn't learn very much about the circumstances;

We only knew what we read in the papers —

Of course, there was a great deal too much in the papers.

Downing, do you think that it might have been suicide,

And that his Lordship knew it?



## *The Family Reunion*

DOWNING

Unlikely, Sir, if I may say so.  
Much more likely to have been an accident.  
I mean, knowing her Ladyship,  
I don't think she had the courage.

490

CHARLES

Did she ever talk of suicide?

DOWNING

Oh yes, she did, every now and again.  
But in my opinion, it is those that talk  
That are the least likely. To my way of thinking  
She only did it to frighten people.  
If you take my meaning — just for the effect.

CHARLES

I understand, Downing. Was she in good spirits?

500

DOWNING

Well, always about the same, Sir.  
What I mean is, always up and down.  
Down in the morning, and up in the evening,  
And *then* she used to get rather excited,  
And, in a way, irresponsible, Sir.  
If I may make so bold, Sir,  
I always thought that a very few cocktails  
Went a long way with her Ladyship.  
She wasn't one of those that are *designed* for drinking:  
It's natural for some and unnatural for others.

510

CHARLES

And how was his Lordship, during the voyage?

## *The Family Reunion*

DOWNING

Well, you might say depressed, Sir.  
But you know his Lordship was always very quiet:  
Very uncommon that I saw him in high spirits.  
For what my judgment's worth, I always said his Lordship  
Suffered from what they call a kind of repression.  
But what struck me . . . more nervous than usual;  
I mean to say, you could see that he was nervous.  
He behaved as if he thought something might happen.

CHARLES

520 What sort of thing?

DOWNING

Well, I don't know, Sir.  
But he seemed very anxious about my Lady.  
Tried to keep her in when the weather was rough,  
Didn't like to see her lean over the rail.  
He was in a rare fright, once or twice.  
But you know, it is just my opinion, Sir,  
That his Lordship is rather psychic, as they say.

CHARLES

Were they always together?

DOWNING

Always, Sir.

That was just my complaint against my Lady.  
It's my opinion that man and wife  
530 Shouldn't see too much of each other, Sir.  
Quite the contrary of the usual opinion,  
I dare say. She wouldn't leave him alone.  
And there's my complaint against these ocean liners  
With all their swimming baths and gymnasiums

## *The Family Reunion*

There's not even a place where a man can go  
For a quiet smoke, where the women can't follow him  
She wouldn't leave him out of her sight.

CHARLES

During that evening, did you see him?

DOWNING

Oh yes, Sir, I'm sure I saw him.

I don't mean to say that he had any orders —

540

His Lordship is always most considerate

About keeping me up. But when I say I saw him,

I mean that I saw him accidental.

You see, Sir, I was down in the Tourist,

And I took a bit of air before I went to bed,

And you could see the corner of the upper deck.

And I remember, there I saw his Lordship

Leaning over the rail, looking at the water —

There wasn't a moon, but I was sure it was him.

While I took my turn about, for near half an hour

550

He stayed there alone, looking over the rail.

Her Ladyship must have been all right then,

Mustn't she, Sir? or else he'd have known it.

CHARLES

Oh yes . . . quite so. Thank you, Downing.

I don't think we need you any more.

GERALD

Oh, Downing,

Is there anything wrong with his Lordship's car?

DOWNING

Oh no, Sir, she's in good running order:

I see to that.



# *The Family Reunion*

GERALD

I only wondered  
Why you've been busy about it tonight.

DOWNING

560 Nothing wrong, Sir:  
Only I like to have her always ready.  
Would there be anything more, Sir?

GERALD

Thank you, Downing;  
Nothing more.

[*Exit DOWNING.*]

VIOLET

Well, Charles, I must say, with your investigations,  
You seem to have left matters much as they were —  
Except for having brought Downing into it:  
Of which I disapprove.

CHARLES

Of which you disapprove.  
But I believe that an unconscious accomplice is desirable.

CHORUS

Why should we stand here like guilty conspirators,  
waiting for some revelation  
570 When the hidden shall be exposed, and the newsboy  
shall shout in the street?  
When the private shall be made public, the common  
photographer  
Flashlight for the picture papers: why do we huddle  
together  
In a horrid amity of misfortune? why should we be im-  
plicated, brought in and brought together?

# *The Family Reunion*

IVY

I do not trust Charles with his confident vulgarity,  
acquired from worldly associates.

GERALD

Ivy is only concerned for herself, and her credit among  
her shabby genteel acquaintance.

VIOLET

Gerald is certain to make some blunder, he is useless out  
of the army.

CHARLES

Violet is afraid that her status as Amy's sister will be  
diminished.

CHORUS

We all of us make the pretension  
To be the uncommon exception  
To the universal bondage.\*  
We like to appear in the newspapers  
So long as we are in the right column.  
We know about the railway accident  
We know about the sudden thrombosis  
And the slowly hardening artery.  
We like to be thought well of by others  
So that we may think well of ourselves.  
And any explanation will satisfy:  
We only ask to be reassured  
About the noises in the cellar  
And the window that should not have been open.  
Why do we all behave as if the door might suddenly  
open, the curtains be drawn,

580

590

## *The Family Reunion*

The cellar make some dreadful disclosure, the roof disappear,  
And we should cease to be sure of what is real or unreal?  
Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist that the world is  
what we have always taken it to be.

### AMY'S VOICE

Ivy! Violet! has Arthur or John come yet?

### IVY

There is no news of Arthur or John.

[*Enter AMY and AGATHA.*]

### AMY

It is very annoying. They both promised to be here  
In good time for dinner. It is very annoying.

600 Now they can hardly arrive in time to dress.

I do not understand what could have gone wrong  
With both of them, coming from different directions.  
Well, we must go and dress, I suppose. I hope Harry  
will feel better  
After his rest upstairs.

[*Exeunt, except AGATHA.*]



## Scene II

AGATHA

*[Enter MARY with flowers.]*

MARY\*

The spring is very late in this northern country,  
Late and uncertain, clings to the south wall.  
The gardener had no garden-flowers to give me for this  
evening.

AGATHA

I always forget how late the spring is, here.

MARY

I had rather wait for our windblown blossoms,  
Such as they are, than have these greenhouse flowers  
Which do not belong here, which do not know  
The wind and rain, as I know them.

AGATHA

I wonder how many we shall be for dinner.

MARY

Seven . . . nine . . . ten surely.  
I hear that Harry has arrived already  
And he was the only one that was uncertain.  
Arthur or John may be late, of course.  
We may have to keep the dinner back . . .

## *The Family Reunion*

AGATHA

And also Dr. Warburton. At least, Amy has invited him.

MARY

Dr. Warburton? I think she might have told me;  
It is very difficult, having to plan  
For uncertain numbers. Why did she ask him?

AGATHA

She only thought of asking him a little while ago.

MARY

20 Well, there's something to be said for having an outsider;  
For what is more formal than a family dinner?  
An official occasion of uncomfortable people  
Who meet very seldom, making conversation.  
I am very glad if Dr. Warburton is coming.  
I shall have to sit between Arthur and John.  
Which is worse, thinking of what to say to John,  
Or having to listen to Arthur's chatter  
When he thinks he is behaving like a man of the world?  
Cousin Agatha, I want your advice.

AGATHA

30 You had more than you wanted of that, when at college.  
I should have thought

MARY

I might have known you'd throw that up against me.  
I know I wasn't one of your favourite students:  
I only saw you as a hard headmistress  
Who knew the way of dominating timid girls.  
I don't see you any differently now;  
But I really wish that I'd taken your advice  
And tried for a fellowship, seven years ago.

## *The Family Reunion*

Now I want your advice, because there's no one else to  
ask,  
And because you are strong, and because you don't belong  
here  
Any more than I do. I want to get away.

40

AGATHA

After seven years?

MARY

Oh, you don't understand!  
But you do understand. You only want to know  
Whether I understand. You know perfectly well,  
What Cousin Amy wants, she usually gets.  
Why do *you* so seldom come here? *You're* not afraid of  
her,  
But I think you must have wanted to avoid collision.  
I suppose I could have gone, if I'd had the moral courage,  
Even against a will like hers. I know very well  
Why she wanted to keep me. She didn't need me:  
She would have done just as well with a hired servant  
Or with none. She only wanted me for Harry —  
Not such a compliment: she only wanted  
To have a tame daughter-in-law with very little money,  
A housekeeper-companion for her and Harry.  
Even when he married, she still held on to me  
Because she couldn't bear to let any project go;  
And even when *she* died:\* I believed that Cousin Amy —  
I almost believed it — had killed her by willing.  
Doesn't that sound awful? I know that it does.  
Did you ever meet her? What was she like?

50

60

AGATHA

I am the only one who ever met her,\*  
The only one Harry asked to his wedding:  
Amy did not know that. I was sorry for her;\*



## *The Family Reunion*

I could see that she distrusted me — she was frightened  
of the family,  
She wanted to fight them — with the weapons of the  
weak,  
Which are too violent. And it could not have been easy,  
Living with Harry. It's not not what she did to Harry,  
That's important, I think, but what he did to himself.\*

### MARY

70 But it wasn't till I knew that Harry had returned  
That I felt the strength to go. I know I must go.  
But where? I want a job: and you can help me.

### AGATHA

I am very sorry, Mary, I am very sorry for you;  
Though you may not think me capable of such a feeling.  
I would like to help you: but you must not run away.  
Any time before now, it would have shown courage  
And would have been right. Now, the courage is only  
the moment  
And the moment is only fear and pride. I see more than  
this,  
More than I can tell you, more than there are words for.  
At this moment, there is no decision to be made;  
80 The decision will be made by powers beyond us\*  
Which now and then emerge. You and I, Mary,  
Are only watchers and waiters: not the easiest rôle.  
I must go and change for dinner.

[*Exit.*]

### MARY

So you will not help me!

Waiting, waiting, always waiting.  
I think this house *means* to keep us waiting.

[*Enter HARRY.*]



## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

Waiting? For what?

MARY

How do you do, Harry.

You are down very early. I thought you had just arrived.  
Did you have a comfortable journey?

HARRY

Not very.

But, at least, it did not last long. How are you, Mary?

MARY

Oh, very well. What are you looking for?

90

HARRY

I had only just noticed that this room is quite unchanged:  
The same hangings . . . the same pictures . . . even the  
table,

The chairs, the sofa . . . all in the same positions.  
I was looking to see if anything was changed,  
But if so, I can't find it.

MARY

Your mother insisted  
On everything being kept the same as when you left it.

HARRY

I wish she had not done that. It's very unnatural,  
This arresting of the normal change of things:  
But it's very like her. What I might have expected.  
It only makes the changing of people  
All the more manifest.

100

## *The Family Reunion*

MARY

Yes, nothing changes here,  
And we just go on . . . drying up, I suppose,  
Not noticing the change. But to you, I am sure,  
We must seem very altered.

HARRY

You have hardly changed at all —  
And I haven't seen you since you came down from Oxford.

MARY

Well, I must go and change for dinner.  
We do change — to that extent.

HARRY

No, don't go just yet.

MARY

Are you glad to be at home?

HARRY

There was something

I wanted to ask you. I don't know yet.

110 All these years I'd been longing to get back  
Because I thought I never should. I thought it was a  
place

Where life was substantial and simplified —  
But the simplification took place in my memory,  
I think. It seems I shall get rid of nothing.  
Of none of the shadows that I wanted to escape;  
And at the same time, other memories,  
Earlier, forgotten, begin to return  
Out of my childhood. I can't explain.

## *The Family Reunion*

But I thought I might escape from one life to another,\*  
And it may be all one life, with no escape. Tell me,  
Were you ever happy here, as a child at Wishwood?

120

MARY

Happy? not really, though I never knew why:  
It always seemed that it must be my own fault,  
And never to be happy was always to be naughty.  
But there were reasons: I was only a cousin  
Kept here because there was nothing else to do with me.  
I didn't belong here. It was different for you.  
And you seemed so much older. We were rather in awe  
of you —  
At least, I was.

HARRY

Why were we not happy?

MARY

Well, it all seemed to be imposed upon us;  
Even the nice things were laid out ready,  
And the treats were always so carefully prepared;  
There was never any time to invent our own enjoyments.  
But perhaps it was all designed for you, not for us.

130

HARRY

No, it didn't seem like that. I was part of the design  
As well as you. But what was the design?\*

It never came off. But do you remember

MARY

The hollow tree in what we called the wilderness

HARRY

Down near the river. That was the stockade  
From which we fought the Indians, Arthur and John.

140

## *The Family Reunion*

MARY

It was the cave where we met by moonlight  
To raise the evil spirits.

HARRY

Arthur and John.

Of course we were punished for being out at night  
After being put to bed. But at least they never knew  
Where we had been.

MARY

They never found the secret.

HARRY

Not then. But later, coming back from school  
For the holidays, after the formal reception  
And the family festivities, I made my escape  
As soon as I could, and slipped down to the river  
150 To find the hiding place. The wilderness was gone,  
The tree had been felled, and a neat summer-house  
Had been erected, 'to please the children'.  
It's absurd that one's only memory of freedom  
Should be a hollow tree in a wood by the river.

MARY

But when I was a child I took everything for granted,  
Including the stupidity of older people —  
They lived in another world, which did not touch me.  
Just now, I find them very difficult to bear.  
They are always assured that you ought to be happy  
160 At the very moment when you are wholly conscious  
Of being a misfit, of being superfluous.  
But why should I talk about my commonplace troubles?  
They must seem very trivial indeed to you.  
It's just ordinary hopelessness.



## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

One thing you cannot know:  
The sudden extinction of every alternative,  
The unexpected crash of the iron cataract.  
You do not know what hope is, until you have lost it.  
You only know what it is not to hope:  
You do not know what it is to have hope taken from you,  
Or to fling it away, to join the legion of the hopeless 170  
Unrecognised by other men, though sometimes by each  
other.

MARY

I know what you mean. That is an experience  
I have not had. Nevertheless, however real,  
However cruel, it may be a deception.\*

HARRY

What I see  
May be one dream or another; if there is nothing else  
The most real is what I fear.\* The bright colour fades  
Together with the unrecapturable emotion,  
The glow upon the world, that never found its object;  
And the eye adjusts itself to a twilight  
Where the dead stone is seen to be batrachian, 180  
The aphyllous branch ophidian.\*

MARY

You bring your own landscape  
No more real than the other.\* And in a way you contradict  
yourself:  
That sudden comprehension of the death of hope  
Of which you speak, I know you have experienced it,  
And I can well imagine how awful it must be.  
But in this world another hope keeps springing  
In an unexpected place, while we are unconscious of it.

## *The Family Reunion*

You hoped for something, in coming back to Wishwood,  
Or you would not have come.

HARRY

Whatever I hoped for

190 Now that I am here I know I shall not find it.  
The instinct to return to the point of departure  
And start again as if nothing had happened,  
Isn't that all folly? It's like the hollow tree,  
Not there.

MARY

But surely, what you say  
Only proves that you expected Wishwood  
To be your real self, to do something for you  
That you can only do for yourself.  
What you need to alter is something inside you  
Which you can change anywhere — here, as well as  
elsewhere.

HARRY

200 Something inside me, you think, that can be altered!  
And here, indeed! where I have felt them near me,  
Here and here and here — wherever I am not looking,  
Always flickering at the corner of my eye,  
Almost whispering just out of earshot —  
And inside too, in the nightly panic  
Of dreaming dissolution.\* You do not know,  
You cannot know, you cannot understand.

MARY

I think I could understand, but you would have to be  
patient  
With me, and with people who have not had your ex-  
perience.

## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

If I tried to explain, you could never understand:  
Explaining would only make a worse misunderstanding;  
Explaining would only set me farther away from you.  
There is only one way for you to understand  
And that is by seeing. They are much too clever\*  
To admit you into *our* world. Yours is no better.  
They have seen to that: it is part of the torment.

210

MARY

If you think I am incapable of understanding you —  
But in any case, I must get ready for dinner.

HARRY

No, no, don't go! Please don't leave me  
Just at this moment. I feel it is important.  
Something should have come of this conversation.

220

MARY

I am not a wise person,  
And in the ordinary sense I don't know you very well,  
Although I remember you better than you think,  
And what is the real you. I haven't much experience,  
But I see something now which doesn't come from tutors  
Or from books, or from thinking, or from observation:  
Something which I did not know I knew.  
Even if, as you say, Wishwood is a cheat,\*  
Your family a delusion — then it's *all* a delusion,  
Everything you feel — I don't mean what you think,  
But what you feel. You attach yourself to loathing  
As others do to loving: an infatuation  
That's wrong, a good that's misdirected. You deceive  
yourself

230

## *The Family Reunion*

Like the man convinced that he is paralysed  
Or like the man who believes that he is blind  
While he still sees the sunlight. I know\* that this is true.

### HARRY

I have spent many years in useless travel;  
You have stayed in England, yet you seem  
240 Like someone who comes from a very long distance,  
Or the distant waterfall in the forest,\*  
Inaccessible, half-heard.  
And I hear your voice as in the silence  
Between two storms, one hears the moderate usual noises  
In the grass and leaves, of life persisting,  
Which ordinarily pass unnoticed.  
Perhaps you are right, though I do not know  
How you should know it. Is the cold spring  
Is the spring not an evil time, that excites us with lying  
voices?\*

### MARY

250 The cold spring now is the time  
For the ache in the moving root  
The agony in the dark  
The slow flow throbbing the trunk  
The pain of the breaking bud.  
These are the ones that suffer least:  
The aconite under the snow  
And the snowdrop crying for a moment in the wood.

### HARRY

Spring is an issue of blood\*  
A season of sacrifice  
260 And the wail of the new full tide  
Returning the ghosts of the dead  
Those whom the winter drowned  
Do not the ghosts of the drowned



Return to land in the spring?  
Do the dead want to return?

MARY

Pain is the opposite of joy  
But joy is a kind of pain  
I believe the moment of birth  
Is when we have knowledge of death  
I believe the season of birth  
Is the season of sacrifice  
For the tree and the beast, and the fish  
Thrashing itself upstream:  
And what of the terrified spirit\*  
Compelled to be reborn  
To rise toward the violent sun  
Wet wings into the rain cloud  
Harefoot over the moon?

270

HARRY

What have we been saying? I think I was saying  
That it seemed as if I had been always here  
And you were someone who had come from a long  
distance.

280

Whether I know what I am saying, or why I say it,  
That does not matter. You bring me news\*  
Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,  
Sunlight and singing; when I had felt sure  
That every corridor only led to another,  
Or to a blank wall; that I kept moving  
Only so as not to stay still. Singing and light.  
Stop!

What is that? do you feel it?

290

MARY

What, Harry?

## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

That apprehension deeper than all sense,  
Deeper than the sense of smell, but like a smell  
In that it is indescribable, a sweet and bitter smell  
From another world. I know it, I know it!  
More potent than ever before, a vapour dissolving  
All other worlds, and me into it. O Mary!  
Don't look at me like that! Stop! Try to stop it!  
I am going. Oh why, now? Come out!  
Come out! Where are you? Let me see you,  
300 Since I know you are there, I know you are spying on me.  
Why do you play with me, why do you let me go,  
Only to surround me? — When I remember them  
'They leave me alone: when I forget them  
Only for an instant of inattention  
They are roused again, the sleepless hunters  
They will not let me sleep. At the moment before sleep  
I always see their claws distended  
Quietly, as if they had never stirred.  
It was only a moment, it was only one moment  
310 That I stood in sunlight, and thought I might stay there.

MARY

Look at me. You can depend on me.  
Harry! Harry! It's all *right*, I tell you.  
If you will depend on me, it will be all right.

HARRY

Come out!

*[The curtains part, revealing the Eumenides in the  
window embrasure.]*

Why do you show yourselves now for the first time?  
When I knew her, I was not the same person.\*  
I was not any person. Nothing that I did  
Has to do with me. The accident of a dreaming moment,

## *The Family Reunion*

Of a dreaming age, when I was someone else  
Thinking of something else, puts me among you.  
I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,  
Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential  
looks

320

Incriminate, but that other person, if person  
You thought I was: let your necrophily\*  
Feed upon that carcass. They will not go.

MARY

Harry! There is no one here.\*

*[She goes to the window and pulls the curtains across.]*

HARRY

They were here, I tell you. They are here.  
Are you so imperceptive, have you such dull senses  
That you could not see them? If I had realised  
That you were so obtuse, I would not have listened  
To your nonsense.\* Can't you help me?  
You're of no use to me. I must face them.  
I must fight them. But they are stupid.\*  
How can one fight with stupidity?  
Yet I must speak to them.

330

*[He rushes forward and tears apart the curtains: but the  
embrasure is empty.]*

MARY

Oh, Harry!

## Scene III

HARRY, MARY, IVY, VIOLET, GERALD, CHARLES

VIOLET

Good evening, Mary: aren't you dressed yet?  
How do you think that Harry is looking?  
Why, who could have pulled those curtains apart?  
[*Pulls them together.*]

Very well, I think, after such a long journey;  
You know what a rush he had to be here in time  
For his mother's birthday.

IVY

Mary, my dear,

Did you arrange these flowers? Just let me change them.  
You don't mind, do you? I know so much about flowers;  
Flowers have always been my passion.

10 You know I had my own garden once, in Cornwall,  
When I could afford a garden; and I took several prizes  
With my delphiniums. I was rather an authority.

GERALD

Good evening, Mary. You've seen Harry, I see.  
It's good to have him back again, isn't it?  
We must make him feel at home. And most auspicious  
That he could be here for his mother's birthday.



# *The Family Reunion*

MARY

I must go and change. I came in very late.

[*Exit.*]

CHARLES

Now we only want Arthur and John  
I am glad that you'll all be together, Harry;  
They need the influence of their elder brother.  
Arthur's a bit irresponsible, you know;  
You should have a sobering effect upon him.  
After all, you're the head of the family.

20

AMY'S VOICE

Violet! Has Arthur or John come yet?\*

VIOLET

Neither of them is here yet, Amy.

[*Enter AMY, with DR. WARBURTON.*]

AMY

It is most vexing. What can have happened?  
I suppose it's the fog that is holding them up,  
So it's no use to telephone anywhere. Harry!  
Haven't you seen Dr. Warburton?  
You know he's the oldest friend of the family,  
And he's known you longer than anybody, Harry.  
When he heard that you were going to be here for dinner  
He broke an important engagement to come.

30

WARBURTON

I dare say we've both changed a good deal, Harry.  
A country practitioner doesn't get younger.  
It takes me back longer than you can remember  
To see you again. But you can't have forgotten  
The day when you came back from school with measles

## *The Family Reunion*

And we had such a time to keep you in bed.  
40 You didn't like being ill in the holidays.

IVY

It *was* unpleasant, coming home to have an illness.

VIOLET

It was always the same with your minor ailments  
And children's epidemics: you would never stay in bed  
Because you were convinced that you would never get  
well.

HARRY

Not, I think, without some justification:  
For what you call restoration to health  
Is only incubation of another malady.\*

WARBURTON

You mustn't take such a pessimistic view  
Which is hardly complimentary to my profession.  
50 But I remember, when I was a student at Cambridge,  
I used to dream of making some **great** discovery  
To do away with one disease or another.  
Now I've had forty years experience  
I've left off thinking in terms of the laboratory.  
We're all of us ill in one way or another:  
We call it health when we find no symptom  
Of illness. Health is a relative term.

IVY

You must have had a very rich experience, Doctor,  
In forty years.

WARBURTON

Indeed, yes.

60 Even in a country practice. My first patient, now —  
You wouldn't believe it, ladies — was a murderer,

## *The Family Reunion*

Who suffered from an incurable cancer.\*  
How he fought against it! I never saw a man  
More anxious to live.

HARRY

Not at all extraordinary.  
It is really harder to believe in murder  
Than to believe in cancer. Cancer is here:  
The lump, the dull pain, the occasional sickness:  
Murder a reversal of sleep and waking.\*  
Murder was there. Your ordinary murderer  
Regards himself as an innocent victim.  
To himself he is still what he used to be  
Or what he would be. He cannot realise  
That everything is irrevocable,  
The past unredeemable.\* But cancer, now,  
That is something real.

70

WARBURTON

Well, let's not talk of such matters.  
How did we get on to the subject of cancer?  
I really don't know. — But now you're all grown up  
I haven't a patient left at Wishwood.  
Wishwood was always a cold place, but healthy.  
It's only when I get an invitation to dinner  
That I ever see your mother.

80

VIOLET

Yes, look at your mother!  
Except that she can't get about now in winter.  
You wouldn't think that she was a day older  
Than on her birthday ten years ago.

GERALD

Is there any use in waiting for Arthur and John?

## *The Family Reunion*

AMY

We might as well go into dinner.

They may come before we finish. Will you take me in,  
Doctor?

I think we are very much the oldest present —

In fact we are the oldest inhabitants.

90 As we came first, we will go first, into dinner.

WARBURTON

With pleasure, Lady Monchensey,

And I hope that next year will bring me the same honour.

[*Exeunt* AMY, DR. WARBURTON, HARRY.]

CHORUS

I am afraid of all that has happened, and of all that is to  
come;

Of the things to come that sit at the door, as if they had  
been there always.

And the past is about to happen, and the future was long  
since settled.

And the wings of the future darken the past,\* the beak  
and claws have desecrated

History. Shamed

The first cry in the bedroom, the noise in the nursery,  
mutilated

The family album,\* rendered ludicrous

100 The tenants' dinner, the family picnic on the moors.

Have torn

The roof from the house, or perhaps it was never there.

And the bird sits on the broken chimney. I am afraid.

IVY

This is a most undignified terror, and I must struggle  
against it.



# *The Family Reunion*

GERALD

I am used to tangible danger, but only to what I can understand.

VIOLET

It is the obtuseness of Gerald and Charles and that doctor, that gets on my nerves.

CHARLES

If the matter were left in my hands, I think I could manage the situation.

*[Exeunt.]*

*[Enter MARY, and passes through to dinner. Enter AGATHA.]*

AGATHA

The eye is on this house  
The eye covers it  
There are three together\*  
May the three be separated  
May the knot that was tied  
Become unknotted  
May the crossed bones  
In the filled-up well  
Be at last straightened  
May the weasel and the otter  
Be about their proper business  
The eye of the day time  
And the eye of the night time  
Be diverted from this house  
Till the knot is unknotted  
The crossed is uncrossed  
And the crooked is made straight.

110

120

*[Exit to dinner.]*

END OF PART I

Acc. No. \_\_\_\_\_

Call No. \_\_\_\_\_

# DATE SLIP

"This book was issued from the Library on the date last stamped. A fine of **10 Paise** will be charged for each day the book is kept over - due".

[illegible]

## **Part II**

### **The Library, after Dinner**

Acc. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Call No. \_\_\_\_\_

Call No. \_\_\_\_\_

# DATE SLIP

"This book was issued from the Library on the date last stamped. A fine of **10 Paise** will be charged for each day the book is kept over - due".

[illegible]



## Scene I

HARRY, WARBURTON

WARBURTON

I'm glad of a few minutes alone with you, Harry.  
In fact, I had another reason for coming this evening  
Than simply in honour of your mother's birthday.  
I wanted a private conversation with you  
On a confidential matter.

HARRY

I can imagine —\*

Though I think it is probably going to be useless,  
Or if anything, make matters rather more difficult.  
But talk about it, if you like.

WARBURTON

You don't understand me.

I'm sure you cannot know what is on my mind;  
And as for making matters more difficult —  
It is much more difficult not to be prepared  
For something that is very likely to happen.

HARRY

O God, man, the things that are going to happen\*  
Have already happened.

# *The Family Reunion*

WARBURTON

That is in a sense true,\*  
But without your knowing it, and what you know  
Or do not know, at any moment  
May make an endless difference to the future.  
It's about your mother . . .

HARRY

What about my mother?

Everything has always been referred back to my mother.  
20 When we were children, before we went to school,  
The rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother;  
Misconduct was simply being unkind to mother;  
What was wrong was whatever made her suffer,  
And whatever made her happy was what was virtuous —  
Though never very happy, I remember. That was why  
We all felt like failures, before we had begun.  
When we came back, for the school holidays,  
They were not holidays, but simply a time  
In which we were supposed to make up to mother  
30 For all the weeks during which she had not seen us  
Except at half-term, and seeing us then  
Only seemed to make her more unhappy, and made us  
Feel more guilty, and so we misbehaved  
Next day at school, in order to be punished,  
For punishment made us feel less guilty. Mother  
Never punished us, but made us feel guilty.  
I think that the things that are taken for granted  
At home, make a deeper impression upon children  
Than what they are told.

WARBURTON

Stop, Harry, you're mistaken.

40 I mean, you don't know what I want to tell you.  
You may be quite right, but what we are concerned with

## *The Family Reunion*

Now, is your mother's happiness in the future,  
For the time she has to live: not with the past.

HARRY

Oh, is there any difference!

How can we be concerned with the past

And not with the future? or with the future

And not with the past? What I'm telling you

Is very important. Very important.

You must let me explain, and then you can talk.

I don't know why, but just this evening

I feel an overwhelming need for explanation —

But perhaps I only dream that I am talking

And shall wake to find that I have been silent

Or talked to the stone deaf: and the others

Seem to hear something else than what I am saying.

But if you want to talk, at least you can tell me

Something useful. Do you remember my father?

WARBURTON

Why, yes, of course, Harry, but I really don't see

What that has to do with the present occasion

Or with what I have to tell you.

HARRY

What you have to tell me

Is either something that I know already

Or unimportant, or else untrue.

But I want to know more about my father.

I hardly remember him, and I know very well

That I was kept apart from him, till he went away.

We never heard him mentioned, but in some way or

another

We felt that he was always here.

## *The Family Reunion*

But when we would have grasped for him, there was only  
a vacuum

Surrounded by whispering aunts: Ivy and Violet —

70 Agatha never came then. Where was my father?

### WARBURTON

Harry, there's no good probing for misery.

There was enough once: but what festered

Then, has only left a cautery.\*

Leave it alone. You know that your mother

And your father were never very happy together:

They separated by mutual consent

And he went to live abroad. You were only a boy

When he died. You would not remember.

### HARRY

But now I do remember. Not Arthur or John,

80 They were too young. But now I remember

A summer day of unusual heat,\*

The day I lost my butterfly net;

I remember the silence, and the hushed excitement

And the low conversation of triumphant aunts.

It is the conversations not overheard,

Not intended to be heard, with the sidewise looks,

That bring death into the heart of a child.

*That* was the day he died. Of course.

I mean, I suppose, the day on which the news arrived.

### WARBURTON

90 You overinterpret.

I am sure that your mother always loved him;

There was never the slightest suspicion of scandal.



## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

Scandal? who said scandal? I did not.  
Yes, I see now. That night, when she kissed me,  
I felt the trap close.\* If you won't tell me,  
I must ask Agatha. I never dared before.

WARBURTON

I advise you strongly, not to ask your aunt —  
I mean, there is nothing she could tell you. But, Harry,  
We can't sit here all the evening, you know;  
You will have to have the birthday celebration,  
And your brothers will be here. Won't you let me tell you  
What I had to say?

100

HARRY

Very well, tell me.

WARBURTON

It's about your mother's health that I wanted to talk to  
you.

I must tell you, Harry, that although your mother  
Is still so alert, so vigorous of mind,  
Although she seems as vital as ever —  
It is only the force of her personality,  
Her indomitable will, that keeps her alive.  
I needn't go into technicalities  
At the present moment. The whole machine is weak  
And running down. Her heart's very feeble.  
With care, and avoiding all excitement  
She may live several years. A sudden shock  
Might send her off at any moment.  
If she had been another woman  
She would not have lived until now  
Her determination has kept her going:  
She has only lived for your return to Wishwood,

110

## *The Family Reunion*

For you to take command at Wishwood,  
120 And for that reason, it is most essential  
That nothing should disturb or excite her.

HARRY

Well!\*

WARBURTON

I'm very sorry for you, Harry.  
I should have liked to spare you this,  
Just now. But there were two reasons  
Why you had to know. One is your mother,  
To make her happy for the time she has to live.  
The other is yourself: the future of Wishwood  
Depends on you. I don't like to say this;  
But you know that I am a very old friend,  
130 And have always been a party to the family secrets —  
You know as well as I do that Arthur and John  
Have been a great disappointment to your mother.  
John's very steady — but he's not exactly brilliant;  
And Arthur has always been rather irresponsible.  
Your mother's hopes are all centred on you.

HARRY

Hopes? . . . Tell me  
Did you know my father at about my present age?

WARBURTON

Why, yes, Harry, of course I did.

HARRY

What did he look like then? Did he look at all like me?

WARBURTON

140 Very much like you. Of course there are differences:  
But, allowing for the changes in fashion

## *The Family Reunion*

And your being clean-shaven, very much like you.  
And now, Harry, let's talk about yourself.

HARRY

I never saw a photograph. There is no portrait.

WARBURTON

What I want to know is, whether you've been sleeping . . .  
[Enter DENMAN.]

DENMAN

It's Sergeant Winchell is here, my Lord,  
And wants to see your Lordship very urgent,  
And Dr. Warburton. He says it's very urgent  
Or he wouldn't have troubled you.

HARRY

I'll see him.

[Exit DENMAN.]

WARBURTON

I wonder what he wants. I hope nothing has happened  
To either of your brothers.

150

HARRY

Nothing can have happened  
To either of my brothers. Nothing can happen —  
If Sergeant Winchell is real.\* But Denman saw him.  
But what if Denman saw him, and yet he was not real?  
That would be worse than anything that has happened.  
What if *you* saw him, and . . .

WARBURTON

Harry! Pull yourself together.

Something may have happened to one of your brothers.

[Enter WINCHELL.]

## *The Family Reunion*

WINCHELL

Good evening, my Lord. Good evening, Doctor.  
Many happy . . . Oh, I'm sorry, my Lord,  
160 I was thinking it was your birthday, not her Ladyship's.

HARRY

Her Ladyship's!\*

*[He darts at WINCHELL and seizes him by the shoulders.]*

He is real, Doctor.

So let us resume the conversation. You, and I  
And Winchell. Sit down, Winchell,  
And have a glass of port. We were talking of my father.

WINCHELL

Always at your jokes, I see. You don't look a year older  
Than when I saw you last, my Lord. But a country ser-  
geant

Doesn't get younger. Thank you, no, my Lord;  
I don't find port agrees with the rheumatism.

WARBURTON

For God's sake, Winchell, tell us your business.  
His Lordship isn't very well this evening.

WINCHELL

I understand, Sir.

It'd be the same if it was my birthday —  
I beg pardon, I'm forgetting.

If it was my mother's. God rest her soul,  
She's been dead these ten years. How is her Ladyship,  
If I may ask, my Lord?



## *The Family Reunion*

**HARRY**

Why do you keep asking  
About her Ladyship? Do you know or don't you?\*

I'm not afraid of you.

**WINCHELL**

I should hope not, my Lord.

I didn't mean to put myself forward.

But you see, my Lord, I had good reason for asking . . .

**HARRY**

Well, do you want me to produce her for you?

180

**WINCHELL**

Oh no indeed, my Lord, I'd much rather not . . .

**HARRY**

You mean you think I can't. But I might surprise you;  
I think I might be able to give you a shock.

**WINCHELL**

There's been shock enough for one evening, my Lord:  
That's what I've come about.

**WARBURTON**

For Heaven's sake, Winchell,

Tell us your business.

**WINCHELL**

It's about Mr. John.

**HARRY**

John!

## *The Family Reunion*

WINCHELL

Yes, my Lord, I'm sorry.

I thought I'd better have a word with you quiet,  
Rather than phone and perhaps disturb her Ladyship.  
190 So I slipped along on my bike. Mostly walking,  
What with the fog so thick, or I'd have been here sooner.  
I'd telephoned to Dr. Warburton's,  
And they told me he was here, and that you'd arrived.  
Mr. John's had a bit of an accident  
On the West Road, in the fog, coming along  
At a pretty smart pace, I fancy, ran into a lorry  
Drawn up round the bend. We'll have the driver up for  
this:

Says he doesn't know this part of the country  
And stopped to take his bearings. We've got him at the  
Arms —

200 Mr. John, I mean. By a bit of luck  
Dr. Owen was there, and looked him over;  
Says there's nothing wrong but some nasty cuts  
And a bad concussion; says he'll come round  
In the morning, most likely, but he mustn't be moved.  
But Dr. Owen was anxious that you should have a look  
at him.

WARBURTON

Quite right, quite right. I'll go and have a look at him.  
We must explain to your mother . . .

AMY'S VOICE

Harry! Harry!

Who's there with you? Is it Arthur or John?

[*Enter AMY, followed severally by VIOLET, IVY,  
AGATHA, GERALD and CHARLES.*]

Winchell! what are you here for?

## *The Family Reunion*

WINCHELL

I'm sorry, my Lady, but I've just told the doctor,  
It's really nothing but a minor accident.

210

WARBURTON

It's John has had the accident, Lady Monchensey;  
And Winchell tells me Dr. Owen has seen him  
And says its nothing but a slight concussion,  
But he mustn't be moved tonight. I'd trust Owen  
On a matter like this. You can trust Owen.  
We'll bring him up tomorrow; and a few days rest,  
I've no doubt, will be all that he needs.

AMY

Accident? What sort of an accident?

WINCHELL

Coming along in the fog, my Lady,  
And he must have been in rather a hurry.  
There was a lorry drawn up where it shouldn't be,  
Outside of the village, on the West Road.

220

AMY

Where is he?

WINCHELL

At the Arms, my Lady;  
Of course, he hasn't come round yet.  
Dr. Owen was there, by a bit of luck.

GERALD

I'll go down and see him, Amy, and come back and  
report to you.

AMY

I must see for myself. Order the car at once.

## *The Family Reunion*

WARBURTON

I forbid it, Lady Monchensey.

230 As your doctor, I forbid you to leave the house tonight.  
There is nothing you could do, and out in this weather  
At this time of night, I would not answer for the consequences.

I am going myself. I will come back and report to you.

AMY

I must see for myself. I do not believe you.

CHARLES

Much better leave it to Warburton, Amy.  
Extremely fortunate for us that he's here.  
We must put ourselves under Warburton's orders.

WARBURTON

I repeat, Lady Monchensey, that you must not go out.  
If you do, I must decline to continue to treat you.  
240 You are only delaying me. I shall return at once.

AMY

Well, I suppose you are right. But can I trust you?

WARBURTON

You have trusted me a good many years, Lady Monchensey;  
This is not the time to begin to doubt me.  
Come, Winchell. We can put your bicycle  
On the back of my car.

[*Exeunt* WARBURTON and WINCHELL.]

VIOLET

Well, Harry,

I think that you might have had something to say.



## ***The Family Reunion***

**Aren't you sorry for your brother? Aren't you aware  
Of what is going on? and what it means to your mother?**

**HARRY**

**Oh, of course-I'm sorry. But from what Winchell says  
I don't think the matter can be very serious.**

**250**

**A minor trouble like a concussion  
Cannot make very much difference to John.  
A brief vacation from the kind of consciousness  
That John enjoys, can't make very much difference  
To him or to anyone else. If he was ever really conscious,  
I should be glad for him to have a breathing spell:  
But John's ordinary day isn't much more than breathing.**

**IVY**

**Really, Harry! how can you be so callous?  
I always thought you were so fond of John.**

**VIOLET**

**And if you don't care what happens to John,  
You might show some consideration to your mother.**

**260**

**AMY**

**I do not know very much:\***  
**And as I get older, I am coming to think  
How little I have ever known.  
But I think your remarks are much more inappropriate  
Than Harry's.**

**HARRY**

**It's only when they see nothing  
That people can always show the suitable emotions —  
And so far as they feel at all, their emotions are suitable.  
They don't understand what it is to be awake,  
To be living on several planes at once**

**270**

## *The Family Reunion*

Though one cannot speak with several voices at once.  
I have all of the rightminded feeling about John  
That you consider appropriate. Only, that's not the  
language  
That I choose to be talking. I will not talk yours.

AMY

You looked like your father  
When you said that.

HARRY

I think, mother,  
I shall make you lie down. You must be very tired.

[*Exeunt HARRY and AMY*]

VIOLET

I really do not understand Harry's behaviour.

AGATHA

I think it is as well to leave Harry to establish  
280 If he can, some communication with his mother.

VIOLET

I do not seem to be very popular tonight.

CHARLES

Well, there's no sort of use in any of us going —  
On a night like this — it's a good three miles;  
There's nothing we could do that Warburton can't.  
If he's worse than Winchell said, then he'll let us know  
at once.

GERALD

I am really more afraid of the shock for Amy;  
But I think that Warburton understands *that*.

# *The Family Reunion*

IVY

You are quite right, Gerald, the one thing that matters  
Is not to let her see that anyone is worried.  
We must carry on as if nothing had happened,  
And have the cake and presents.

290

GERALD

But *I*'m worried about Arthur:  
He's much more apt than John to get into trouble.

CHARLES

Oh, but Arthur's a brilliant driver.  
After all the experience he's had at Brooklands,  
*He's* not likely to get into trouble.

GERALD

A brilliant driver, but more reckless.

IVY

Yet I remember, when they were boys,  
Arthur was always the more adventurous  
But John was the one that had the accidents,  
Somehow, just because he *was* the slow one.  
He was always the one to fall off the pony,  
Or out of a tree — and always on his head.

300

VIOLET

But a year ago, Arthur took me out in his car,  
And I told him I would never go out with him again.  
Not that I wanted to go with him at all —  
Though of course he meant well — but I think an open car  
Is so undignified: you're blown about so,  
And you feel so conspicuous, lolling back  
And so near the street, and everyone staring;

## *The Family Reunion*

310 And the pace he went at was simply terrifying.  
I said I would rather walk: and I did.

GERALD

Walk? where to?

VIOLET

He started out to take me to Cheltenham;  
But I stopped him somewhere in Chiswick, I think.  
Anyway, the district was unfamiliar  
And I had the greatest trouble in getting home.  
I am sure he meant well. But I do think he is reckless.

GERALD

I wonder how much Amy knows about Arthur?

CHARLES

More than she cares to mention, I imagine.  
[Enter HARRY.]

HARRY

320 Mother is asleep, I think: it's strange how the old  
Can drop off to sleep in the middle of calamity  
Like children, or like hardened campaigners. She looked  
Very much as she must have looked when she was a  
child.  
You've been holding a meeting — the usual family  
inquest  
On the characters of all the junior members?  
Or engaged in predicting the minor event,  
Engaged in foreseeing the minor disaster?  
You go on trying to think of each thing separately,  
Making small things important, so that everything  
330 May be unimportant, a slight deviation  
From some imaginary course that life ought to take,



## *The Family Reunion*

That you call normal. What you call the normal  
Is merely the unreal and the unimportant.  
I was like that in a way, so long as I could think  
Even of my own life as an isolated ruin,  
A casual bit of waste in an orderly universe.  
But it begins to seem just part of some huge disaster,\*  
Some monstrous mistake and aberration  
Of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order.  
If you only knew the years that I have had to live  
Since I came home, a few hours ago, to Wishwood.

340

VIOLET

I will make no observation on what you say, Harry;  
My comments are not always welcome in this family.  
[Enter DENMAN.]

DENMAN

Excuse me, Miss Ivy. There's a trunk call for you.

IVY

A trunk call? for me? why who can want me?

DENMAN

He wouldn't give his name, Miss; but it's Mr. Arthur.

IVY

Arthur! Oh dear, I'm afraid *he's* had an accident.

[*Exeunt IVY and DENMAN.*]

VIOLET

When it's Ivy that he's asking for, I expect the worst.

AGATHA

Whatever you have learned, Harry, you must remember  
That there is always more: we cannot rest in being\*  
The impatient spectators of malice or stupidity.

350

## *The Family Reunion*

We must try to penetrate the other private worlds  
Of make-believe and fear. To rest in our own suffering  
Is evasion of suffering. We must learn to suffer more.

VIOLET

Agatha's remarks are invariably pointed.

HARRY

Do you think that I believe what I said just now?\*

That was only what I should like to believe.  
I was talking in abstractions: and you answered in ab-

stractions.

I have a private puzzle. Were they simply outside,  
360 I might escape somewhere, perhaps. Were they simply  
inside

I could cheat them perhaps with the aid of Dr. War-

burton —

Or any other doctor, who would be another Warburton,  
If you decided to set another doctor on me.  
But this is too real for your words to alter.  
Oh, there *must* be another way of talking  
That would get us somewhere. You don't understand me.  
You can't understand me. It's not being alone  
That is the horror — to be alone with the horror.  
What matters is the filthiness. I can clean my skin,  
370 Purify my life, void my mind,  
But always the filthiness, that lies a little deeper . . .  
[Enter IVY.]

IVY

Where is there an evening paper?

GERALD

Why, what's the matter.

# *The Family Reunion*

IVY

Somebody, look for Arthur in the evening paper.  
That was Arthur, ringing up from London:  
The connection was so bad, I could hardly hear him,  
And his voice was very queer. It seems that Arthur too  
Has had an accident. I don't think he's hurt,  
But he says that he hasn't got the use of his car,  
And he missed the last train, so he's coming up tomorrow;  
And he said there was something about it in the paper,  
But it's all a mistake. And not to tell his mother.

380

VIOLET

What's the use of asking for an evening paper?  
You know as well as I do, at this distance from London  
Nobody's likely to have this evening's paper.

CHARLES

Stop, I think I bought a lunch edition  
Before I left St. Pancras. If I did, it's in my overcoat.  
I'll see if it's there. There might be something in that.

[*Exit.*]

GERALD

Well, I said that Arthur was every bit as likely  
To have an accident as John. And it wasn't John's fault,  
I don't believe. John is unlucky,  
But Arthur is definitely reckless.

390

VIOLET

I think these racing cars ought to be prohibited.  
[*Re-enter CHARLES, with a newspaper.*]

CHARLES

Yes, there is a paragraph . . . I'm glad to say  
It's not very conspicuous . . .

## *The Family Reunion*

GERALD

There'll have been more in the later editions.  
You'd better read it to us.

CHARLES [*reads*]

*'Peer's Brother in Motor Smash'*

'The Hon. Arthur Gerald Charles Piper, younger brother of Lord Monchensey, who ran into and demolished a roundsman's cart in Ebury Street early on the morning of January 1st, was fined £50 and costs to-day, and forbidden to drive a car for the next twelve months.

'While trying to extricate his car from the collision, Mr. Piper reversed into a shop-window. When challenged, Mr. Piper said: "I thought it was all open country about here" —'

GERALD

Where?

CHARLES

400 In Ebury Street. 'The police stated that at the time of the accident Mr. Piper was being pursued by a patrol, and was travelling at the rate of 66 miles an hour. When asked why he did not stop when signalled by the police car, he said: "I thought you were having a game with me." '

GERALD

This is what the Communists make capital out of.

CHARLES

There's a little more. 'The Piper family . . .' no, we needn't read that.



# *The Family Reunion*

VIOLET

This is just what I expected. But if Agatha  
Is going to moralise about it, I shall scream.

GERALD

It's going to be awkward, explaining this to Amy.

IVY

Poor Arthur! I'm sure that you're being much too hard  
on him.

CHARLES

In my time, these affairs were kept out of the papers;  
But nowadays, there's no such thing as privacy.

CHORUS

In an old house there is always listening, and more is  
heard than is spoken.

And what is spoken remains in the room, waiting for  
the future to hear it.

And whatever happens began in the past, and presses hard  
on the future.

The agony in the curtained bedroom,\* whether of birth or  
of dying,

Gathers in to itself all the voices of the past, and projects  
them into the future.

The treble voices on the lawn

The mowing of hay in summer

The dogs and the old pony

The stumble and the wail of little pain

The chopping of wood in autumn

And the singing in the kitchen

And the steps at night in the corridor

The moment of sudden loathing

And the season of stifled sorrow

410

420

## *The Family Reunion*

The whisper, the transparent deception  
The keeping up of appearances  
The making the best of a bad job  
All twined and tangled together, all are recorded.  
There is no avoiding these things  
And we know nothing of exorcism  
And whether in Argos or England  
430 There are certain inflexible laws  
Unalterable, in the nature of music\*  
There is nothing at all to be done about it,  
There is nothing to do about anything,  
And now it is nearly time for the news  
We must listen to the weather report  
And the international catastrophes.

[*Exeunt* CHORUS.]

## Scene II

HARRY, AGATHA

HARRY

John will recover, be what he always was;  
Arthur again be sober, though not for very long;  
And everything will go on as before. These mild surprises  
Should be in the routine of normal life at Wishwood.  
John is the only one of us I can conceive  
As settling down to make himself at home at Wishwood,  
Make a dull marriage, marry some woman stupider —  
Stupider than himself. He can resist the influence  
Of Wishwood, being unconscious, living in gentle motion  
Of horses, and right visits to the right neighbours  
At the right times; and be an excellent landlord.

10

AGATHA

What is in your mind, Harry?  
I can guess about the past and what you mean about the  
future;\*  
But a present is missing, needed to connect them.  
You may be afraid that I would not understand you,  
You may also be afraid of being understood,  
Try not to regard it as an explanation.

HARRY

I still have to learn exactly what their meaning is.\*  
At the beginning, eight years ago,

## *The Family Reunion*

- 20 I felt, at first, that sense of separation,  
Of isolation unredeemable, irrevocable —  
It's eternal, or gives a knowledge of eternity,  
Because it feels eternal while it lasts. That is one hell.\*  
Then the numbness came to cover it — that is another —  
That was the second hell of not being there,  
The degradation of being parted from my self,  
From the self which persisted only as an eye, seeing.  
All this last year, I could not fit myself together:  
When I was inside the old dream, I felt all the same  
emotion
- 30 Or lack of emotion, as before: the same loathing  
Diffused, I not a person, in a world not of persons  
But only of contaminating presences.  
And then I had no horror of my action,  
I only felt the repetition of it  
Over and over. When I was outside,\*  
I could associate nothing of it with myself,  
Though nothing else was real. I thought foolishly  
That when I got back to Wishwood, as I had left it,  
Everything would fall into place. But *they* prevent it.\*
- 40 I still have to find out what their meaning is.  
Here I have been finding  
A misery long forgotten, and a new torture,  
The shadow of something behind our meagre childhood,  
Some origin of wretchedness. Is that what they would  
show me?  
And now I want you to tell me about my father.\*

AGATHA

What do you want to know about your father?

HARRY

If I knew, then I should not have to ask.

You know what I want to know, and that is enough:



## *The Family Reunion*

Warburton told me that, though he did not mean to.  
What I want to know is something I need to know,  
And only you can tell me. I know that much.

50

AGATHA

I had to fight for many years to win my dispossession,  
And many years to keep it. What people know me as,  
The efficient principal of a women's college —  
That is the surface. There is a deeper  
Organisation, which your question disturbs.

HARRY

When I know, I know that in some way I shall find  
That I have always known it. And that will be better.

AGATHA

I will try to tell you. I hope I have the strength.

HARRY

I have thought of you as the completely strong,  
The liberated from the human wheel.\*  
So I looked to you for strength. Now I think it is  
A common pursuit of liberation.

60

AGATHA

Your father might have lived — or so I see him —  
An exceptionally cultivated country squire,  
Reading, sketching, playing on the flute,  
Something of an oddity to his county neighbours,  
But not neglecting public duties.  
He hid his strength beneath unusual weakness,  
The diffidence of a solitary man:  
Where he was weak he recognised your mother's power,  
And yielded to it.

70

## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

There was no ecstasy.  
Tell me now, who were my parents?

AGATHA

Your father and your mother.

HARRY

You tell me nothing.

AGATHA

The dead man whom you have assumed to be your  
father,  
And my sister whom you acknowledge as your mother:  
There is no mystery here.

HARRY

What then?

AGATHA

You see your mother as identified with this house —  
It was not always so. There were many years  
80 Before she succeeded in making terms with Wishwood,  
Until she took your father's place, and reached the point  
where  
Wishwood supported her, and she supported Wishwood.  
At first it was a vacancy. A man and a woman  
Married, alone in a lonely country house together,  
For three years childless, learning the meaning  
Of loneliness. Your mother wanted a sister here  
Always. I was the youngest: I was then  
An undergraduate at Oxford. I came  
Once for a long vacation. I remember  
90 A summer day of unusual heat  
For this cold country.

## *The Family Reunion*

**HARRY**  
And then?

**AGATHA**

There are hours when there seems to be no past or future,  
Only a present moment of pointed light  
When you want to burn. When you stretch out your hand  
To the flames. They only come once,  
Thank God, that kind. Perhaps there is another kind,  
I believe, across a whole Thibet of broken stones  
That lie, fang up, a lifetime's march. I have believed this.

**HARRY**

I have known neither.

**AGATHA**

The autumn came too soon, not soon enough.  
The rain and wind had not shaken your father  
Awake yet. I found him thinking  
How to get rid of your mother. What simple plots!  
He was not suited to the role of murderer.

100

**HARRY**

In what way did he wish to murder her?

**AGATHA**

Oh, a dozen foolish ways, each one abandoned  
For something more ingenious. You were due in three  
months time;  
You would not have been born in that event: I stopped  
him.  
I can take no credit for a little common sense,  
He would have bungled it.

110

I did not want to kill *you*!

## *The Family Reunion*

You to be killed! What were you then? only a thing  
called 'life' —

Something that should have been *mipe*, as I felt then.  
Most people would not have felt that compunction  
If they felt no other. But I wanted you!  
If that had happened, I knew I should have carried  
Death in life, death through lifetime, death in my womb.  
I felt that you were in some way mine!  
And that in any case I should have no other child.

### HARRY

And have me. That is the way things happen.  
120 Everything is true in a different sense,\*  
A sense that would have seemed meaningless before.  
Everything tends towards reconciliation  
As the stone falls, as the tree falls. And in the end  
That is the completion which at the beginning  
Would have seemed the ruin.\*  
Perhaps my life has only been a dream\*  
Dreamt through me by the minds of others. Perhaps  
I only dreamt I pushed her.\*

### AGATHA

So I had supposed. What of it?  
What we have written is not a story of detection,  
180 Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.\*  
It is possible that you have not known what sin  
You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain  
That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation.  
It is possible that sin may strain and struggle  
In its dark instinctive birth, to come to consciousness  
And so find expurgation. It is possible  
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,  
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.\*  
Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter,



## *The Family Reunion*

Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen  
To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer.\*

140

HARRY

Look, I do not know why,  
I feel happy for a moment, as if I had come home.  
It is quite irrational, but now  
I feel quite happy, as if happiness  
Did not consist in getting what one wanted  
Or in getting rid of what can't be got rid of  
But in a different vision.\* This is like an end.

AGATHA

And a beginning.\* Harry, my dear,  
I feel very tired, as only the old feel.  
The young feel tired at the end of an action —  
The old, at the beginning. It is as if  
I had been living all these years upon my capital,  
Instead of earning my spiritual income daily:  
And I am old, to start again to make my living.

150

HARRY

But you are not unhappy, just now?

AGATHA

What does the word mean?

There's relief from a burden that I carried,\*  
And exhaustion at the moment of relief.  
The burden's yours now, yours  
The burden of all the family. And I am a little frightened.

160

HARRY

You, frightened! I can hardly imagine it.  
I wish I had known — but that was impossible.  
I only now begin to have some understanding

## *The Family Reunion*

Of you, and of all of us. Family affection  
Was a kind of formal obligation, a duty  
Only noticed by its neglect. One had that part to play.  
After such training, I could endure, these ten years,  
Playing a part that had been imposed upon me;  
And I returned to find another one made ready —  
170 The book laid out, lines underscored, and the costume  
Ready to be put on. But it is very odd:  
When other people seemed so strong,\* their apparent  
strength  
Stifled my decision. Now I see  
I might even become fonder of my mother —  
More compassionate at least — by understanding.  
But she would not like that. Now I see  
I have been wounded in a war of phantoms,  
Not by human beings — they have no more power than I.  
The things I thought were real are shadows, and the real  
180 Are what I thought were private shadows. O that awful  
privacy  
Of the insane mind! Now I can live in public.  
Liberty is a different kind of pain from prison.\*

### AGATHA

I only looked through the little door\*  
When the sun was shining on the rose-garden:  
And heard in the distance tiny voices  
And then a black raven flew over.  
And then I was only my own feet walking  
Away, down a concrete corridor  
In a dead air. Only feet walking  
190 And sharp heel scraping. Over and under  
Echo and noise of feet.  
I was only the feet, and the eye  
Seeing the feet: the unwinking eye  
Fixing the movement. Over and under.\*

# ***The Family Reunion***

**HARRY**

In and out, in an endless drift  
Of shrieking forms in a circular desert  
Weaving with contagion of putrescent embraces  
On dissolving bone. In and out, the movement  
Until the chain broke, and I was left  
Under the single eye above the desert.

200

**AGATHA**

Up and down, through the stone passages  
Of an immense and empty hospital  
Pervaded by a smell of disinfectant,  
Looking straight ahead, passing barred windows.  
Up and down. Until the chain breaks.

**HARRY**

To and fro, dragging my feet  
Among inner shadows in the smoky wilderness,  
Trying to avoid the clasping branches\*  
And the giant lizard. To and fro.  
Until the chain breaks.\*

210

The chain breaks,  
The wheel stops, and the noise of machinery,  
And the desert is cleared, under the judicial sun  
Of the final eye, and the awful evacuation  
Cleanses.

I was not there, you were not there, only our  
phantasms  
And what did not happen is as true as what did happen  
O my dear, and you walked through the little door  
And I ran to meet you in the rose-garden.\*

**AGATHA**

This is the next moment. This is the beginning.  
We do not pass twice through the same door

## *The Family Reunion*

220 Or return to the door through which we did not pass.  
I have seen the first stage: relief from what happened  
Is also relief from that unfulfilled craving  
Flattered in sleep, and deceived in waking.

You have a long journey.

### HARRY

Not yet! not yet! this is the first time that I have been  
free

From the ring of ghosts with joined hands, from the  
pursuers,

And come into a quiet place.

Why is it so quiet?

Do you feel a kind of stirring underneath the air?

Do you? don't you? a communication, a scent

Direct to the brain . . . but not just as before,

230 Not quite like, not the same . . .

[*The EUMENIDES appear.*]

and this time

You cannot think that I am surprised to see you.

And you shall not think that I am afraid to see you.

This time, you are real, this time, you are outside me,\*

And just endurable. I know that you are ready,

Ready to leave Wishwood, and I am going with you.

You followed me here, where I thought I should escape  
you —

No! you were already here before I arrived.

Now I see at last that I am following you,

And I know that there can only be one itinerary

240 And one destination. Let us lose no time. I will follow.

[*The curtains close. AGATHA goes to the window, in a somnambular fashion, and opens the curtains, disclosing the empty embrasure. She steps into the place which the EUMENIDES had occupied.*]



# *The Family Reunion*

AGATHA

A curse comes to being  
As a child is formed.\*  
In both, the incredible  
Becomes the actual  
Without our intention  
Knowing what is intended.  
A curse is like a child, formed  
In a moment of unconsciousness  
In an accidental bed  
Or under an elder tree  
According to the phase  
Of the determined moon.  
A curse is like a child, formed  
To grow to maturity:  
Accident is design  
And design is accident  
In a cloud of unknowing.\*  
O my child, my curse,  
You shall be fulfilled:\*  
The knot shall be unknotted  
And the crooked made straight.

250

260

*[She moves back into the room.]*

What have I been saying? I think I was saying  
That you have a long journey. You have nothing to stay  
for.

Think of it as like a children's treasure hunt:  
Here you have found a clue, hidden in the obvious  
place.

Delay, and it is lost. Love compels cruelty  
To those who do not understand love.  
What you have wished to know, what you have learned  
Mean the end of a relation, make it impossible.  
You did not intend this, I did not intend it,  
No one intended, but . . . You must go.

270

## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

Shall we ever meet again?

AGATHA

Shall we ever meet again?

And who will meet again? Meeting is for strangers.  
Meeting is for those who do not know each other.

HARRY

I know that I have made a decision  
In a moment of clarity, and now I feel dull again.  
I only know that I made a decision  
Which your words echo. I am still befouled,  
But I know there is only one way out of defilement —  
280 Which leads in the end to reconciliation.  
And I know that I must go.

AGATHA

You must go.

[*Enter AMY.*]

AMY

What are you saying to Harry? He has only arrived,  
And you tell him to go?

AGATHA

He shall go.

AMY

He shall go? and who are you to say he shall go?  
I think I know well enough why you wish him to go.

AGATHA

I wish nothing. I only say what I know must happen.

# *The Family Reunion*

AMY

You only say what you intended to happen.

HARRY

Oh, mother,

This is not to do with Agatha, any more than with the rest of you.

My advice has come from quite a different quarter,  
But I cannot explain that to you now. Only be sure  
That I know what I am doing, and what I must do,  
And that it is the best thing for everybody.

290

But at present, I cannot explain it to anyone:  
I do not know the words in which to explain it —  
That is what makes it harder. You must just believe me,  
Until I come again.\*

AMY

But why are you going?

HARRY

I can only speak

And you cannot hear me. I can only speak  
So you may not think I conceal an explanation,  
And to tell you that I would have liked to explain.

300

AMY

Why should Agatha know, and I not be allowed to?

HARRY

I do not know whether Agatha knows  
Or how much she knows. Any knowledge she may have —  
It was not I who told her . . . All this year,  
This last year, I have been in flight  
But always in ignorance of invisible pursuers.  
Now I know that all my life has been a flight

## *The Family Reunion*

And phantoms fed upon me while I fled. Now I know  
That the last apparent refuge, the safe shelter,  
310 That is where one meets them. That is the way of  
spectres . . .

AMY

There is no one here!  
No one, but your family!

HARRY

And now I know  
That my business is not to run away, but to pursue,  
Not to avoid being found, but to seek.  
I would not have chosen this way, had there been any  
other!  
It is at once the hardest thing, and the only thing possible.  
Now they will lead me. I shall be safe with them;  
I am not safe here.\*

AMY

So you *will* run away.

AGATHA

In a world of fugitives\*  
320 The person taking the opposite direction  
Will appear to run away.

AMY

I was speaking to Harry.

HARRY

It is very hard, when one has just recovered sanity,  
And not yet assured in possession, that is when  
One begins to seem the maddest to other people.  
It is hard for you too, mother, it is indeed harder,  
Not to understand.



# *The Family Reunion*

AMY

Where are you going?

HARRY

I shall have to learn. That is still unsettled.  
I have not yet had the precise directions.  
Where does one go from a world of insanity?  
Somewhere on the other side of despair.  
To the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation,  
A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar,  
The heat of the sun and the icy vigil,  
A care over lives of humble people,  
The lesson of ignorance, of incurable diseases.  
Such things are possible. It is love and terror  
Of what waits and wants me, and will not let me fall.  
Let the cricket chirp. John shall be the master.  
All I have is his. No harm can come to him.  
What would destroy me will be life for John,  
I am responsible for him. Why I have this election\*  
I do not understand. It must have been preparing  
always,  
And I see it was what I always wanted. Strength de-  
manded  
That seems too much, is just strength enough given.  
I must follow the bright angels.

380

340

[Exit.]

## Scene III

AMY, AGATHA

AMY

I was a fool, to ask you again to Wishwood;  
But I thought, thirty-five years is long, and death is an  
end,  
And I thought that time might have made a change in  
Agatha —  
It has made enough in *me*. Thirty-five years ago  
You took my husband from me. Now you take my son.

AGATHA

What did I take? nothing that you ever had.  
What did I get? thirty years of solitude,  
Alone, among women, in a women's college,  
Trying not to dislike women. Thirty years in which to  
think.

10 Do you suppose that I wanted to return to Wishwood?

AMY

The more rapacious, to take what I never had;  
The more unpardonable, to taunt me with not having it.  
Had you taken what I had, you would have left me at  
least a memory  
Of something to live upon. You knew that you took  
everything  
Except the walls, the furniture, the acres;

## *The Family Reunion*

Leaving nothing — but what I could breed for myself,  
What I could plant here. Seven years I kept him,  
For the sake of the future, a discontented ghost,  
In his own house. What of the humiliation,  
Of the chilly pretences in the silent bedroom,  
Forcing sons upon an unwilling father?  
Dare you think what that does to one? Try to think of it.  
I *would* have sons, if I could not have a husband:  
Then I let him go. I abased myself.  
Did I show any weakness, any self-pity?  
I forced myself to the purposes of Wishwood;  
I even asked you back, for visits, after he was gone,  
So that there might be no ugly rumours.  
You thought I did not know!  
You may be close, but I always saw through *him*.  
And now it is my son.

20

30

### AGATHA

I know one thing, Amy:  
That you have never changed. And perhaps I have not.  
I thought that I had, until this evening.  
But at least I wanted to. Now I must begin.  
There is nothing more difficult. But you are just the same:  
Just as voracious for what you cannot have  
Because you repel it.

### AMY

I prepared the situation  
For us to be reconciled, because of Harry,  
Because of his mistakes, because of his unhappiness,  
Because of the misery that he has left behind him,\*  
Because of the waste. I wanted to obliterate  
His past life, and have nothing except to remind him  
Of the years when he had been a happy boy at Wishwood;  
For his future success.

40

## *The Family Reunion*

AGATHA

Success is relative:

It is what we can make of the mess we have made of things,  
It is what he can make, not what you would make for him.

AMY

Success is one thing, what you would make for him  
Is another. I call it failure. Your fury for possession  
Is only the stronger for all these years of abstinence.  
50 Thirty-five years ago you took my husband from me  
And now you take my son.

AGATHA

Why should we quarrel for what neither can have?  
If neither has ever had a husband or a son  
We have no ground for argument.

AMY

Who set you up to judge? what, if you please,  
Gives *you* the power to know what is best for Harry?  
What gave you this influence to persuade him  
To abandon his duty, his family and his happiness?  
Who has planned his good? is it you or I?  
60 Thirty-five years designing his life,  
Eight years watching, without him, at Wishwood,  
Years of bitterness and disappointment.  
What share had you in this? what have you given?  
And now at the moment of success against failure,  
When I felt assured of his settlement and happiness,  
You who took my husband, now you take my son.  
You take him from Wishwood, you take him from me,  
You take him . . .

[*Enter MARY.*]



# *The Family Reunion*

MARY

Excuse me, Cousin Amy. I have just seen Denman.  
She came to tell me that Harry is leaving:  
Downing told her. He has got the car out.  
What is the matter?

70

AMY

That woman there,  
She has persuaded him: I do not know how.  
I have been always trying to make myself believe  
That he was not such a weakling as his father  
In the hands of any unscrupulous woman.  
I have no influence over him; *you* can try,  
But you will not succeed: she has some spell  
That works from generation to generation.

MARY

Is Harry really going?

80

AGATHA

He is going.

But that is not my spell, it is none of my doing:  
I have only watched and waited. In this world  
It is inexplicable, the resolution is in another.

MARY

Oh, but it is the danger comes from another!  
Can you not stop him? Cousin Agatha, stop him!  
You do not know what I have seen and what I know!  
He is in great danger, I know that, don't ask me,  
You would not believe me, but I tell you I know.\*  
You must keep him here, you must not let him leave.  
I do not know what must be done, what can be done,  
Even here, but elsewhere, everywhere, he is in danger.

90

## *The Family Reunion*

I will stay or I will go, whichever is better;  
I do not care what happens to me,  
But Harry must not go. Cousin Agatha!

### AGATHA

Here the danger, here the death, here, not elsewhere;\*  
Elsewhere no doubt is agony, renunciation,  
But birth and life. Harry has crossed the frontier\*  
Beyond which safety and danger have a different  
meaning.

And he cannot return. That is his privilege.

100 For those who live in this world, this world only,  
Do you think that I would take the responsibility  
Of tempting them over the border? No one could, no one  
who knows.

No one who has the least suspicion of what is to be found  
there.

But Harry has been led across the frontier: he must  
follow;

For him the death is now only on this side,  
For him, danger and safety have another meaning.  
*They* have made this clear. And I who have seen them must  
believe them.

### MARY

Oh! . . . so . . . *you* have seen them too!

### AGATHA

We must all go, each in his own direction.  
110 You, and I, and Harry. You and I,  
My dear, may very likely meet again  
In our wanderings in the neutral territory  
Between two worlds.

# *The Family Reunion*

MARY

Then you *will* help me!

You remember what I said to you this evening?\*

I knew that I was right: you made me wait for this —

Only for this. I suppose I did not really mean it

Then, but I mean it now. Of course it was much too late

Then, for anything to come for me: I should have known

it;

It was all over, I believe, before it began;

But I deceived myself. It takes so many years

To learn that one is dead! So you must help me.

I will go. But I suppose it is much too late

Now, to try to get a fellowship?

120

AMY

So you will all leave me!

An old woman alone in a damned house.

I will let the walls crumble. Why should I worry

To keep the tiles on the roof, combat the endless weather,

Resist the wind? fight with increasing taxes

And unpaid rents and tithes? nourish investments

With wakeful nights and patient calculations

With the solicitor, the broker, agent? Why should I?

It is no concern of the body in the tomb

To bother about the upkeep. Let the wind and rain do

that.

130

*[While AMY has been speaking, HARRY has entered,  
dressed for departure.]*

HARRY

But, mother, you will always have Arthur and John

To worry about: not that John is any worry —

The destined and the perfect master of Wishwood.

The satisfactory son. And as for me,

I am the last you need to worry about;

## *The Family Reunion*

I have my course to pursue, and I am safe from normal  
dangers

If I pursue it. I cannot account for this

140 But it is so, mother. Until I come again.

AMY

If you go now, I shall never see you again.

[*Meanwhile VIOLET, GERALD and CHARLES have  
entered.*]

CHARLES

Where is Harry going? What is the matter?

AMY

Ask Agatha.

GERALD

Why, what's the matter? Where is he going?

AMY

Ask Agatha.

VIOLET

I cannot understand at all. Why is he leaving?

AMY

Ask Agatha.

VIOLET

Really, it sometimes seems to me

That I am the only sane person in this house.

Your behaviour all seems to me quite unaccountable.

What *has* happened, Amy?

AMY

Harry is going away — to become a missionary.\*



# *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

But . . . !

150

CHARLES

A missionary! that's never happened in our family!  
And why in such a hurry? Before you make up your  
mind . . .

VIOLET

You can't really think of *living* in a tropical climate!

GERALD

There's nothing wrong with a tropical climate —  
But you have to go in for some sort of training;  
The medical knowledge is the first thing.  
I've met with missionaries, often enough —  
Some of them very decent fellows. A maligned profession.  
They're sometimes very useful, knowing the natives,  
Though occasionally troublesome. But you'll have to  
learn the language  
And several dialects. It means a lot of preparation.

160

VIOLET

And you need some religious qualification!  
I think you should consult the vicar . . .

GERALD

And don't forget

That you'll need various inoculations —  
That depends on where you're going.

CHARLES

Such a thing

Has never happened in our family.

VIOLET

I cannot understand it.

## *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

I never said that I was going to be a missionary.  
I would explain, but you would none of you believe it;  
If you believed it, still you would not understand.  
170 You can't know why I'm going. You have not seen  
What I have seen. Oh why should you make it so  
ridiculous  
Just now? I only want, please,  
As little fuss as possible. You must get used to it;  
Meanwhile, I apologise for my bad manners.  
But if you *could* understand you would be quite happy  
about it,  
So I shall say good-bye, until we meet again.

GERALD

Well, if you are determined, Harry, we must accept it;  
But it's a bad night, and you will have to be careful.  
You're taking Downing with you?

HARRY

Oh, yes, I'm taking Downing.

180 You need not fear that I am in any danger  
Of such accidents as happen to Arthur and John:  
Take care of *them*. My address, mother,  
Will be care of the bank in London until you hear from  
me.  
Good-bye, mother.

AMY

Good-bye, Harry.

HARRY

Good-bye.

AGATHA

Good-bye.

# *The Family Reunion*

HARRY

Good-bye, Marv.

MARY

Good bye, Harry. Take care of yourself.

[*Exit* HARRY.]

AMY

At my age, I only just begin to apprehend the truth  
About things too late to mend: and that is to be old.  
Nevertheless, I am glad if I can come to know them.  
I always wanted too much for my children,  
More than life can give. And now I am punished for it. 190  
Gerald! you are the stupidest person in this room,  
Violet, you are the most malicious in a harmless way;  
I prefer your company to that of any of the others  
Just to help me to the next room. Where I can lie down.  
Then you can leave me.

GERALD

Oh, certainly, Amy.

VIOLET

I do not understand

A single thing that's happened.

[*Exeunt* AMY, VIOLET, GERALD.]

CHARLES

It's very odd,

But I am beginning to feel, just beginning to feel  
That there is something I *could* understand, if I were told  
it.

But I'm not sure that I want to know. I suppose I'm  
getting old:

Old age came softly up to now. I felt safe enough;

200

## *The Family Reunion*

And now I don't feel safe. As if the earth should open  
Right to the centre, as I was about to cross Pall Mall.  
I thought that life could bring no further surprises;  
But I remember now, that I am always surprised  
By the bull-dog in the Burlington Arcade.\*

What if every moment were like that, if one were awake?\*

You both seem to know more about this than I do.

[*Enter DOWNING, hurriedly, in chauffeur's costume.*]

DOWNING

Oh, excuse me, Miss, excuse me, Mr. Charles:

His Lordship sent me back because he remembered

210 He thinks he left his cigarette-case on the table.

Oh, there it is. Thank you. Good night, Miss; good night,  
Miss Mary; good night, Sir.

MARY

Downing, will you promise never to leave his Lordship  
While you are away?

DOWNING

Oh, certainly, Miss;

I'll never leave him so long as he requires me.

MARY

But he will need you. You must never leave him.

DOWNING

You may think it laughable, what I'm going to say —  
But it's not really strange, Miss, when you come to look  
at it:

After all these years that I've been with him

220 I think I understand his Lordship better than anybody;

And I have a kind of feeling that his Lordship won't need  
me



## *The Family Reunion*

Very long now. I can't give you any reasons.  
But to show you what I mean, though you'd hardly credit  
it,

I've always said, whatever happened to his Lordship  
Was just a kind of preparation for something else.  
I've no gift of language, but I'm sure of what I mean.  
We most of us seem to live according to circumstance,\*  
But with people like him, there's something inside them  
That accounts for what happens to them. You get a feeling  
of it.

So I seem to know beforehand, when something's going 230  
to happen,

And it seems quite natural, being his Lordship.  
And that's why I say now, I have a feeling  
That he won't want me long, and he won't want anybody.

### AGATHA

And, Downing, if his behaviour seems unaccountable  
At times, you mustn't worry about that.  
He is every bit as sane as you or I,  
He sees the world as clearly as you or I see it,  
It is only that he has seen a great deal more than that,  
And we have seen them too — Miss Mary and I.

### DOWNING

I understand you, Miss. And if I may say so, 240  
Now that you've raised the subject, I'm most relieved —  
If you understand my meaning. I thought that was the  
reason

We was off tonight. In fact, I half expected it,  
So I had the car all ready. You mean them ghosts, Miss!  
I wondered when his Lordship would get round to seeing  
them —

And so you've seen them too! They must have given you  
a turn!

## *The Family Reunion*

They did me, at first. You soon get used to them.  
Of course, I knew they was to do with his Lordship,  
And not with me, so I could see them cheerful-like,  
250 In a manner of speaking. There's no harm in *them*,  
I'll take my oath. Will that be all, Miss?

AGATHA

That will be all, thank you, Downing. We mustn't keep  
you;

His Lordship will be wondering why you've been so long.

[*Exit DOWNING. Enter IVY.*]

IVY

Where is Downing going? where is Harry?

Look. Here's a telegram come from Arthur;

[*Enter GERALD and VIOLET.*]

I wonder why he sent it, after telephoning.

Shall I read it to you? I was wondering

Whether to show it to Amy or not.

[*Reads.*]

'Regret delayed business in town many happy returns see  
you tomorrow many happy returns hurrah love  
Arthur.'\*

260 I mean, after what we know of what did happen,  
Do you think Amy ought to see it?

VIOLET

No, certainly not.

You do not know what has been going on, Ivy.

And if you did, you would not understand it.

I do not understand, so how could you? Amy is not well;

And she is resting.

# *The Family Reunion*

Ivy

Oh, I'm sorry. But can't you explain?  
Why do you all look so peculiar? I think I might be  
allowed  
To know what has happened.

AMY'S VOICE

Agatha! Mary! come!  
The clock has stopped in the dark!  
[*Exeunt AGATHA and MARY. Pause.*  
*Enter WARBURTON.*]

WARBURTON

Well! it's a filthy night to be out in.  
That's why I've been so long, going and coming  
But I'm glad to say that John is getting on nicely;  
It wasn't so serious as Winchell made out,  
And we'll have him up here in the morning.  
I hope Lady Monchensey hasn't been worrying?  
I'm anxious to relieve her mind. Why, what's the trouble?  
[*Enter MARY.*]

270

MARY

Dr. Warburton!

WARBURTON

Excuse me.

[*Exeunt MARY and WARBURTON.*]

CHORUS

We do not like to look out of the same window, and see  
quite a different landscape.  
We do not like to climb a stair, and find that it takes us  
down.  
We do not like to walk out of a door, and find ourselves  
back in the same room.

## *The Family Reunion*

- 280 We do not like the maze in the garden, because it too  
closely resembles the maze in the brain.  
We do not like what happens when we are awake, because it  
too closely resembles what happens when we are asleep.  
We understand the ordinary business of living,\*  
We know how to work the machine,  
We can usually avoid accidents,  
We are insured against fire,  
Against larceny and illness,  
Against defective plumbing,  
But not against the act of God.  
We know various spells and enchantments  
290 And minor forms of sorcery,  
Divination and chiromancy,  
Specifics against insomnia,  
Lumbago, and the loss of money.  
But the circle of our understanding  
Is a very restricted area.  
Except for a limited number  
Of strictly practical purposes  
We do not know what we are doing;  
And even, when you think of it,  
300 We do not know much about thinking.\*  
What is happening outside of the circle?  
And what is the meaning of happening?  
What ambush lies beyond the heather  
And behind the Standing Stones?\*Beyond the Heavyside Layer\*  
And behind the smiling moon?  
And what is being done to us?  
And what are we, and what are we doing?  
To each and all of these questions  
310 There is no conceivable answer.  
We have suffered far more than a personal loss —  
We have lost our way in the dark.



# *The Family Reunion*

IVY

I shall have to stay till after the funeral: will my ticket to London still be valid?

GERALD

I do not look forward with pleasure to dealing with Arthur and John in the morning.

VIOLET

We must wait for the will to be read. I shall send a wire in the morning.

CHARLES

I fear that my mind is not what it was — or was it? — and yet I think that I might understand.

ALL

But we must adjust ourselves to the moment: we must do the right thing.

[*Exeunt.*]

[*Enter, from one door, AGATHA and MARY, and set a small portable table. From another door, enter DENMAN carrying a birthday cake with lighted candles, which she sets on the table. Exit DENMAN. AGATHA and MARY walk slowly in single file round and round the table, clockwise. At each revolution they blow out a few candles, so that their last words are spoken in the dark.*]

AGATHA

A curse is slow in coming\*  
To complete fruition  
It cannot be hurried  
And it cannot be delayed

## *The Family Reunion*

MARY

It cannot be diverted  
An attempt to divert it  
Only implicates others  
At the day of consummation

AGATHA

A curse is a power  
Not subject to reason  
Each curse has its course  
Its own way of expiation  
Follow follow

MARY

330 Not in the day time  
And in the hither world  
Where we know what we are doing  
There is not its operation  
Follow follow

AGATHA

But in the night time  
And in the nether world  
Where the meshes we have woven  
Bind us to each other  
Follow follow

MARY

A curse is written  
On the under side of things  
340 Behind the smiling mirror  
And behind the smiling moon  
Follow follow

# *The Family Reunion*

AGATHA

This way the pilgrimage\*  
Of expiation  
Round and round the circle  
Completing the charm  
So the knot be unknotted  
The crossed be uncrossed  
The crooked be made straight  
And the curse be ended  
By intercession  
By pilgrimage  
By those who depart  
In several directions  
For their own redemption  
And that of the departed —  
    May they rest in peace.

350

Call No. \_\_\_\_\_

# DATE SLIP

"This book was issued from the Library on the date last stamped. A fine of **10 Paise** will be charged for each day the book is kept over - due".

[illegible]



# Commentary

Call No. \_\_\_\_\_

# DATE SLIP

"This book was issued from the Library on the date last stamped. A fine of **10 Paise** will be charged for each day the book is kept over - due".

[illegible]

# Commentary

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## PART I Scene 1

*Amy, Ivy, Violet (Agatha) Monchensey.* A letter from Eliot to Mrs. Geoffrey Faber, dated 21 Feb. 1938, evidently answering a question as to where these names came from, states: (*my italics*)

· 'From a verse quoted by Browning:

*'Ivy and Violet, what do you here*

*With blossom and shoot in the warm spring weather*

*Hiding the arms of Moncenci and Vere?'*

Monchensey and Piper have this advantage, that no such names are found in Burke's Peerage. But there are five Dr. Warburtons in the Medical Directory, all in the country (though none has a Cambridge M.D.) and I am rather worried by that.'

Browning quotes this verse as an epigraph to introduce his play *Colombe's Birthday* (1844); he is quoting from Sir John Hanmer's *Fra Cipollo and other poems* (1839). Browning spells the name Monchenci. It also occurs in the anonymous Elizabethan comedy *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, published in 1608, probably known to Eliot. The name is there spelt Mouchensey.

*Denman enters to draw the curtains.* She not only draws them, she draws attention to them. The Eumenides will be

## Commentary

imagined to appear in the embrasure of the window later on. Her entry makes the curtains important.

*Amy's opening speech.* She laments her advancing age and indicates her delicate health, which keeps her house-bound; it is autumn; summer seems a long way off. When young, she had no fears that life at Wishwood might come to an end; Time would flow perpetually on through the seasons, year after year, and nothing would change; Wishwood and its purposes would serenely continue, but now she feels no such assurance.

Much of Eliot's philosophy of Time underlies this speech.

In poem after poem he reflects on the endless, cyclical return of year after year, season after season, from which there seems no escape, yet in which there lies neither meaning or purpose but an endless repetition. Compare:

*Sweeney Agonistes* (Second Fragment)

Birth, and copulation, and death . . .  
That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all,  
Birth and copulation and death . . .  
Morning Evening Noontime Night . . .

*The Rock* (Opening Chorus)

O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,  
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!

*Murder in the Cathedral* (Opening Chorus)

Now I fear disturbance of the quiet seasons . . . *etc.*

There is no way (he seems at first to suggest) of breaking out of these meaningless cycles of Time; but his answer to this is given in *The Rock* (Opening Chorus to Part II) in the passage already quoted (Introduction, page 20).

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time . . .



## Commentary

A moment in time but time was made through that moment:

For without the meaning there is no time,  
And that moment of time gave the meaning.

He is referring, of course, to the moment of the Incarnation and to the life and teaching of Jesus. His fullest and most difficult summing up on Time is in his poem *Burnt Norton*, to which we shall have occasion to refer later.

In this opening speech Amy, whose mainspring is the will to perpetuate Wishwood unaltered forever, is shaken by her deepest fear that time will have a stop; so the normal self, patrician, stoical, practical, semi-pagan, authoritarian, quivers for a moment with a lyrical feeling — a weakness she does not often show — that the procession of the seasons, and the alternation of warm day and calm night may cease suddenly in darkness; age has taken away her confidence in her own all-sufficiency and in the reliableness of the turning world itself. The last words she speaks in the play show that this fear has come upon her once again, with finalising force, at her death:

Agatha! Mary! Come!

The clock has stopped in the dark!

(II. iii. 267-8)

In her beginning is her end. Her philosophy of perpetuating the changeless cycle of life in her world of Wishwood — Wishwood for Wishwood's sake — is contrasted with the philosophy of detachment from the love of created things, which carries you beyond Time into union with the eternal will of God; it is towards this detachment that Harry is being propelled, during the course of the play, by his sense of guilt newly awakened. The two opposing sets of values — Amy's and Harry's — which dominate the play are thus ranged against each other from the start.

## Commentary

### Line 14. IVY

The eldest of the Wishwood Aunts, very conscious of the reduced circumstances in which she has to live — the family money being mainly spent on Wishwood — but determined to maintain her dignity and reserve, and even to assert her authority and opinion — Harry ought to get a new gardener: Mary does not know how to arrange flowers. Disapproval is perhaps her favourite emotion. She likes to think that the younger generation is undoubtedly decadent. Eliot has managed to make her both comic and colourless, a faded, spinsterly snob, not without a certain inner pathos, if one considers the death-in-life she must have lived. Her chief dramatic purpose is to show her utter incomprehension (shared by all the Chorus of Aunts and Uncles) of what is going on round her.

### Line 19. VIOLET

Barely distinguishable from Ivy, but even more genteel and opinionated; she believes herself more intelligent than Ivy however, and this appears in so far as she is 'more malicious in a harmless way', as Amy says. She is ready to believe that Harry's wife had been drinking and that her death was providential. She is even more censorious of 'vulgarity' than Ivy, for instance of those whose money has come 'from heaven knows where' (i.e. from commerce, not by inheritance) and who go to the south of France to bathe and dance in an absolute minimum of clothes: how vulgar it is to be driven in an open car, so near the street, where one can be stared at! How dreadful to get into the newspapers! (One cannot help a pang of sympathy here.) Whatever happens one must do the right thing; in face of the terrible insecurities of life (e.g. the death of Harry's wife) the best thing is to *pretend that nothing has happened*. She has an excellent phrase from time to time; consider the rhythms in

## Commentary

To the chilly deck-chair and the strong cold tea —  
The strong cold stewed bad Indian tea.

(I. i. 21-22).

### Line 23. CHARLES

The warmest, kindest and least stupid of the Chorus of Aunts and Uncles. A bachelor clubman of the old school; likes horses, dogs and guns in the country and a snug club fire with a glass of sherry in town. Something of a gourmet, who believes the younger generation neither knows nor cares what it is eating and drinking, he thinks he can help Harry to restock his cellar. He has considerable worldly wisdom and some true self-knowledge; for instance he tells us that a lot of his own past life presses heavily on his chest now and then in the early hours of the morning, and that when it comes to murder, no one knows what he is likely to do until there is someone he wants to get rid of. He understands that it was Harry's wish to get rid of his wife that makes Harry believe he killed her. He understands that Violet is worried about her status as Amy's sister. As for Harry's strange behaviour, he thinks he might be able to understand it, if it were explained to him; but he isn't sure that he wants to do so. Some fancies are dangerous and it is bad to indulge in them, but one has to take the bull by the horns now and then; he prides himself on being incapable of being shocked, but at the end admits he does not feel safe, and confesses he is still capable of feeling surprise. This is (of course) a sign that his imagination is still alive, and it fits in with his general benevolence. He is certainly surprised that Harry should want to become a missionary; no member of the family had ever been a missionary before; but then he was always surprised by the dog in the Burlington Arcade. . . .

### Line 29. GERALD

A retired Anglo-Indian Colonel and prefers the East



## *Commentary*

where there are better servants and an incomparable climate. Like Violet he despises commerce and those who draw their livelihood from aeroplane shares, but unlike her he approves of the younger generation; it contains some very decent specimens. He has some kindly-intended conventional wisdom; the family should be cheerful and make Harry feel that what has happened doesn't matter; after all Harry (he thinks) has taken his medicine (i.e. suffered from, but endured, a disastrous marriage); let him marry again and better. If Harry is to become a missionary in the tropics, there is nothing wrong with tropical climates (but Harry should get inoculated) and nothing wrong with missionaries. He himself has had an eventful life, in tight corners on the north-west Frontier; he can cope with the dangers he feels able to understand; but Harry's behaviour alarms and mystifies him: 'God preserve us! I never thought it would be as bad as this.' (I. i. 394).

### THE CHORUS COLLECTIVELY

Unlike a mob, whose common denominator is lower than that of its lowest member by himself, the Chorus is collectively more self-aware and imaginative than any one of its components. They know themselves to be deeply embarrassed, on the edge of an experience beyond their capacities, at Amy's command, confronted by the Unfamiliar. They know a feeling of incompetence (amateur actors who do not know their parts) and of guilt (because of a family complicity in the not-quite-solved mystery of Harry's wife's death) at a moment when what is private may be becoming public; they know themselves to be afraid of all that has happened and of what may be about to happen; they even know that the past is about to happen and that the future has been long since settled (a part of Eliot's philosophy of Time and Eternity). They know, in short, that they can insure against fire, but not



## Commentary

against the Act of God. The secret insecurity of the agnostic is thus laid bare in the apparent self-sufficiency of the Wishwood set-up, and its feudal pretensions; in mocking the latter, Eliot is attacking the former. Wishwood is another image for the death-in-life of western civilisation that we see also in the 'Bloomsbury' background of *Prufrock*, the nameless London sub-demi-monde background of *Sweeney Agonistes*, the cosmopolite background of *The Waste Land*, the fascist-communist shirt-politics background of *The Rock*, and the despair of the women of Canterbury in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

*Line 67. I don't belong to any generation.*

Mary feels she has missed her youth, if not her life. (See page 196 below). Gerald's tactless bonhomie has hurt her feelings.

*Line 77. But life may still go right.*

Amy is thinking that Harry, now a widower, is about to return to Wishwood. He may marry Mary yet. As she says in line 81, *I do not want the clock to stop in the dark.*

A marriage between Harry and Mary would perpetuate the Wishwood dynasty; that is how to stop the clock from stopping.

*Line 99. We are very lucky to have Harry at all.*

The death of Harry's wife has freed Harry, by pure luck, to return to Wishwood; his wife would have nothing to do with Wishwood (See I. i. 168).

*Line 110. You know what Agatha means.*

What Violet supposes Agatha to mean is that it will be painful for Harry to return to Wishwood, because of the eight years' estrangement between him and the family, created by his wife, now dead. To be readmitted to the fold, with the implied admission that he had been in the wrong to marry such a wife, would be painful. Of course Agatha means nothing of the sort; her immense superiority of intellect and feeling, as compared with her elder sister's,

## Commentary

is made clear in the speech that follows when she explains what her remark had really meant.

*Line 111. I mean painful, because everything is irrecoverable*

She means: Harry can never recover the innocent happiness of his Wishwood childhood (the nursery tea, the school holiday, the daring feats on the old pony) which was his *real* past, because his *false* past (wandering in the tropics with a wife out of sympathy with him and that real past) can never be remedied, it has made an incurable wound, and a changed man of him. This thought is carried on in Agatha's next speech.

*Line 126. Yes. I mean that at Wishwood he will find another Harry.*

Harry is a changed man, his innocence lost. It will confront him at every corner on his return, to remind him of what he can never be again. And this will be no jolly homecoming.

Agatha seems to show an intuitive knowledge of what is happening to Harry, even before he has appeared to tell her. This serves the double purpose of giving a privileged insight in spiritual matters to Agatha, and, at the same time, of preparing the audience for what is to come by this authoritative statement — that his *real* past (his childhood's innocence) is what his future must be built upon; and this is what happens, for in his long scene with Mary (I. ii, 83–335), Mary helps him to find out what is real in himself, bringing him news 'Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor, sunlight and singing' (I. ii. 285); to that extent she restores innocence and hope in him; he stands in sunlight once again (I. ii. 310) but he is not to stay there, but to start from there, from that innocence and sunlight of his real past, into the new life to be revealed to him by the angels of conscience.

*Line 133. A very 'jolly corner'*

A dry academic joke, of the kind that a don like Agatha

## Commentary

hopes no one else will be intelligent enough to see; in this case however, it was perceived by another academic, F. O. Matthiessen, as early as 1947 and recorded in his *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, second edn. 1947, pp. 175–6. *The Jolly Corner*, as he points out, is the name of a short story by Henry James, in which a man revisits his former home and there meets with his former self.

### *Line 134. The loop in time*

Another echo from Henry James. It suggests that Time is like an endless thread that here and there may coil back and make a loop, and so two points of contact are formed that bring past and present together.

### *Line 135. The spectres show themselves.*

Agatha does not yet know of the Eumenides, and is not here consciously referring to them; what she means (to use a more conventional phrase) are the skeletons in the cupboard of a grown man's life that are (or may be) suddenly revealed to him in all their horror by a meeting with his former self. At the same time her words have (unknown to her) a double meaning and help to prepare the audience for spectres.

### *Line 141. He's taken his medicine*

See note on GERALD, pp. 183–4.

### *Line 160. Had she been drinking?*

See note on VIOLET, p. 182.

### *Line 164. I am very glad that none of you ever met her.*

Amy is mistaken. Agatha had in fact met her (I. ii. 61) for Harry had asked her to his wedding. Amy (who had either not been asked, or else had refused to come) did not know of this.

### *Lines 189–202. Thus with most careful devotion . . .*

This speech is an ironic comment made by Agatha to the audience. With wry amusement she notes how carefully the family is falsifying reality by agreeing to pretend that nothing has happened and by preparing false faces to



## Commentary

meet Harry ('There will be time to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet', as Prufrock says) in a situation already prepared by higher powers than Aunts and Uncles, whose denseness (*opacity*) is shown by the tiny torches of their intelligence. Agatha's intuition tells her (and the audience) that a great moment, long-predestined on a higher plane (*the world around the corner*), is about to come in Harry's life. Such premonitions may come to us eerily; when, in August 1963, I was discussing with Mr. Eliot his use of strange imagery to represent supernatural happenings in *Murder in the Cathedral*, he said — and I noted it in writing at the time — 'the feeling of terror in queer visions is more important than the precise meaning of a given image'. The rustle in the prickly leaves of a holly-tree gives the effect of invisible presences (*The wind's talk in the dry holly-tree*) and the images which follow are suggestive of those moments when our experience of the normal world is suddenly heightened by a feeling of something coming to us from beyond it, a feeling of being haunted, or visited, or in the presence of some different order of being, that makes the hair rise or the skin creep. In the choric passage that follows the Aunts and Uncles show themselves creepily aware of some such visitation about to happen, and long for their conventional cosiness and safety.

### *Line 216. Harry's entry*

In the absence of descriptive stage-directions, we can infer from the subsequent dialogue that he is in a state of great strain, bordering on hysteria. Taking no notice of the conventional greetings offered him, he stares in horror at the window, as if he saw terrible things beyond it, then dashes across to close the curtains, for which his mother mildly rebukes him (line 221). But Harry is beyond politeness; he is facing an unknown supernatural reality in its full force; it is no time for pretences. As well



## Commentary

expect politeness from Macbeth when he sees the ghost of Banquo.

*Line 224. Do you like to be stared at by eyes through a window?*

Harry feels haunted and watched by his pursuers. He feels the reflection of his own contamination staring back at him through the eyes of the Eumenides. The imagery of the eye is in continual use in the course of the play; other examples occur at I. i. 236; I. ii. 300; I. iii. 108-9; II. ii. 27; II. ii. 200. The origin of all this imagery is the idea of the omnipresence of God, both above or outside of us, and within us, watching and speaking through the still, small voice of conscience; the traditional passage in this connection is in Psalm 139:

O Lord, thou hast searched me out and known me . . .  
Thou understandest my thoughts long before. Thou  
art about my path and about my bed and spiest out  
all my ways . . . .

That Eliot conceived the Eumenides in Christian terms is certain from a letter of his to Martin Browne, quoted in F. O. Matthiessen's book, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (1947, pp. 167-8):

. . . the Furies are *divine* instruments," not simple hell-hounds . . . and this gives the cue for the second appearance of the Furies, more patently in their role of divine messengers, to let him know clearly that the only way out is in purgation and holiness. They become exactly 'hounds of heaven'. And Agatha understands this clearly, though Harry only understands it yet in flashes . . .

Now 'hounds of heaven' is an allusion to Francis Thompson's famous poem *The Hound of Heaven*, first published in 1893, also a poem about the pursuit of the soul by the terrifying love of God. In the poem it is Christ who is the

## Commentary

pursuer. That the Eumenides are God's instruments for the conversion of Harry to a life of Christian holiness and service is the whole point of the play; their presence asserts the supernatural order as the supreme reality, by which saints are made out of mortal men. So long as this is understood as the central purpose of the play, the application of psychoanalysis, on a medical rather than a religious plane, makes an interesting parlour game. Eliot was of course well acquainted with psychoanalysis, and actually chose a psychoanalyst's couch to serve the purpose of a confessional in his next play, *The Cocktail Party*.

*Line 233 in the Sunda Sea*

Between Sumatra and Batavia.

*Line 236 corrupted that song*

Their presence (his guilt) made even the song of the nightingale, most lovely and liquid of birdsongs, and a traditional symbol for romantic love, seem foul. It is relevant to note another link between Harry, Sweeney and the *Oresteia* in these bird-references. See *Sweeney among the Nightingales* in Eliot's *Collected Poems*:

The nightingales are singing near  
The Convent of the Sacred Heart,  
And sang within the bloody wood  
When Agamemnon cried aloud,  
And let their liquid siftings fall  
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud.

*Line 241. Many happy returns of the day, mother.*

Abruptly Harry comes out of his hysterical trance and remembers his manners.

*Line 254. You all look so withered and young.*

A typical stroke of Harry's searing wit; they have not aged but the life has gone out of them.

*Line 282. And yet you are talking of nothing else.*

Their very effort to force the conversation away from

## Commentary

the subject of his wife's death makes it obvious to Harry that that is their main preoccupation. They have '*conspired to invent*' a Harry as '*unchanged*' as Wishwood, a Harry coming home as if for the holidays. Compare Gerald's well-meaning but fatuous suggestion in I. i. 139-40. But there is no longer any such person as that sort of Harry.

*Line 293. Only events: not what has happened.*

They can understand the mere event of Harry's wife's death; this in itself is completely unimportant; everyone has to die sooner or later. But *what has happened* is the coming into operation of the curse on the family, initiated so long ago, and now at last manifested to Harry as his pursuit by presences of a supernatural order. That is what has importance for him; but people who have no experience of a supernatural reality cannot be expected to see how trivial the doings of drawing-rooms and the ordinary world of births, deaths and marriages are to a man suddenly involved in 'the perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.'

*Line 304. Never woken to the nightmare*

The nightmare of personal spiritual guilt in a corrupted world in which Harry sees no sign of redemption.

*Line 307. Inaccessible to the plumbers*

The moral stench of the corrupted world cannot be dealt with by the practical sort of means the Aunts and Uncles understand: 'We understand the ordinary business of living . . . we are insured against fire . . . *Against defective plumbing*, but not against the act of God.' (II. iii. 282-8).

*Line 311. I am the old house*

Harry is speaking in symbols, trying to convey to his hearers the nightmarish experience to which he has awoken in images that they could be thought able to understand. He pictures an old house (as it might be Wishwood) with drains that make it stink (but which no plumber can put right), in which you awake in the early hours, conscious of



## Commentary

the haunting sadness in the ancient bedroom (in which, perhaps, some terrible thing was done long ago). This is his picture of the world (as he now perceives it) in which there is the pervasive degradation of sin (like a bad smell, like a great grief) that cannot be redeemed. It is also his picture of himself, highly subjective; he feels his own guilt (the impulse to kill his wife) is beyond redemption. See Introduction, page 54.

*Line 314. As for what happens*

Harry thinks his hearers, the Aunts and Uncles, to be people to whom nothing has ever happened, see line 294). *Of the past you can only see what is past . . .* His hearers are only capable of perceiving a succession of events in Time *Not what is always present.* Not that which is eternally there (the omnipresence of evil). That is what happens, *That is what matters.* (line 316; he returns to the thought at line 330).

*Lines 320–338. The sudden solitude . . . pushed her over.*

Harry's vision of a nightmare-reality rises through this long speech in an escalation of poetry to the climax and crisis of his blunt confession in plain prose. His images depict a race of creatures fallen or lost in a desert, directionless and blinded by smoke clouds, bewildered by the flickering light and darkness, and having no principle to guide their conduct, while all the time their misery is penetrated by a deepening sense of their inward corruption.

*Line 326. The partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling*

Personal pain is partly numbed by a general sense of suffering; there is also the fact that what you do is automatic, and you cannot help it, though you can partly watch yourself do it.

*Line 328. While the slow stain sinks deeper*

See the Introduction, 6, pp. 44–47. He is speaking of the stain of sin.



## Commentary

*Line 332. Because the particular has no language*

For so universal an experience he can only speak in general terms; a precise account of a particular act could not convey what he is attempting to describe; perhaps he is echoing something of Sweeney's frustration with language, in the attempt to describe the feelings of a murderer, when he bursts out with 'I gotta use words when I talk to you!' But there are no words to describe personal feelings in such a general catastrophe.

*Line 335. It was only reversing the senseless direction . . .*

Harry thought of himself and his wife as wandering without purpose or direction in a fetid spiritual wilderness from which there was no escape, except the momentary one of an act of violence (murdering her) — a means such as Orestes and Sweeney took to escape from their dilemmas; to murder his wife would be as senseless as to marry her had been, save for the temporary relief of being rid of her ('Any man has to, needs to, wants to Once in a lifetime, do a girl in').

*Line 336. For a momentary rest on the burning wheel*

Harry changes his metaphor; he now sees himself 'bound Upon a wheel of fire', like King Lear,<sup>2</sup> to reverse the direction in which the wheel was turning would be a kind of momentary relief.

*Line 338. When I pushed her over*

The blunt bathos of this line is intentional. In a letter to Mrs. Faber dated 8 March (1938 or 1939) Eliot wrote:

F. V. Morley . . . , objects to 'pushed' — he thinks the verb has too comic associations. But the association with the trivial and sordid is what I want; and I can't see that any other verb would do. Besides, I want it left quite uncertain whether he really *did* kill her or not; and *pushing over* is exactly the easiest thing to imagine you had done. If you poisoned or shot or strangled somebody there could be no mistake about it. So I don't see this point myself.

## Commentary

*Line 339. You would never imagine anyone could sink so quickly.*

Compare Lady Macbeth: Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him? (*Macbeth* V. 1. 38).

*Line 343. Everything is true in a different sense.*

In one sense (he is saying) she would never be with him again, he had killed her; in another sense she would be with him for ever, unkillable and unkillable. In one sense she was not in the cabin when he returned, in another she was all too present — in his mind.

*Line 358. It goes a good deal deeper . . .*

In this reply to Uncle Charles's kindly and revealing speech, Harry is trying to describe the overmastering sense of evil which he perceives as dominating the whole world, not merely his own conscience brooding upon a particular act; it is the cancer affecting all human wills — another image for Original Sin. Harry is telling Uncle Charles that the murder is not an individual act that can be explained away as a delusion, or even as a single event unlikely to recur, but it emanates from a general condition of infinite corruption.

*Line 380. Get Downing to draw you a hot bath*

Some see in this a symbol of ritual cleansing, derived from ancient Greek drama.

*Lines 389-90. As you once explained the sobbing in the chimney . . .*

Harry is referring to the kinds of fear children have of strange noises and presences in old houses, which stupid grown-ups say do not exist, but an intelligent and sympathetic Aunt like Agatha can explain so that the child no longer is afraid. No doubt he is thinking of some incident in his childhood, in which she comforted him.

*Line 402. Uncle Charles's speech*

Once again Uncle Charles shows his good sense.



## Commentary

### *Line 419. Agatha's speech*

Agatha is saying that it is a necessary move for Amy to consult Dr. Warburton, since the family supposes that Harry's illness is something a doctor can cure; but as it is not, and is in the region of the supernatural ('*on the margin of the impossible*') this 'necessary move' is useless. She makes the same point later when she says 'this is all quite irrelevant' (I. i. 458).

### *Line 468. Enter DOWNING*

If Downing seems too good to be true as a chauffeur, consider him as a Guardian Angel in human form, such as we meet with in *The Cocktail Party*. He combines stolidity with imagination, and efficiency with devotion; he prefers attending to Harry's car, that it may be ready for his departure though he has only just arrived, to a friendly gossip with Mrs. Packell in the kitchen. Audiences feel that here at last is someone sane and trustworthy; Downing's account of what happened on the liner (when Harry's wife went overboard) is instinctively accepted by them; and in spite of what Eliot wrote in his letter to Mrs. Faber, quoted on page 193, I think the reader may accept it too.

Downing is one of the three who, apart from Harry, is privileged to see the Eumenides; the others are Mary and Agatha. Downing sees them even before Harry does (II. iii. 244-6); these three love Harry; if then the Eumenides are only seen by the eyes of love, it is a strong indication that, terrible as they may appear, they are there for his good.

On the Aeschylean plane of reference, Downing takes on the character of Pylades, the inseparable travelling-companion of Orestes in the *Oresteia*. But as Pylades only speaks once, and Downing is quite voluble, the resemblance is not very close.

In the original production, the part was played by Mr. Robert Harris; in a later production by Mr. Victor Lucas, to whom Eliot wrote:

## Commentary

Your interpretation on the stage seemed to me fundamentally correct as bringing out Downing's unobtrusive sense of humour and a rather unconscious power which distinguishes him from everyone else. There is, also, I think a certain detachment and independence. He is, after all, a perfectly modern human being and a skilled mechanic rather than a conventional stage servant of the old school. He will not be heart-broken at separation from his master, but probably aims at setting up for himself with a small garage and filling station in the outer suburbs.

### *Line 580. The universal bondage*

The bondage of mortality, that is of being exposed to the unpleasant chances of life, of being liable to indignity, pain and death; every one feels he should be the exception; other people may suffer dreadful accidents, but surely it cannot happen to oneself? In the same sort of way, when we go abroad, the places we go to swarm with tourists, but we do not think of ourselves as tourists.

## PART I Scene 2

*Mary* is thought to be 'getting on for thirty' (I. i. 73) and feels she has missed her life and belongs to no generation (I. i. 67). A remote cousin of Amy's, she has been brought to Wishwood by her as a wife for Harry; but the old matriarch's plans did not suit him. They suited Mary, but in vain. This has not embittered her; she seems kind, intelligent and good, though at heart deeply unhappy; she has remained at Wishwood because there seemed nothing else to do. Now, at Harry's return, she revives; her arranging of the flowers is symbolic of this. Her scene alone with Harry (Part I Scene 2) rises lyrically into a love-scene, and Harry's feelings for her as a woman are awaken-



## Commentary

ed; but he is not to be let off so easily (See Introduction page 32). Mary is left alone, disconsolate but understanding, at the end of the play, and faces the drear possibility of life as a female don, so vividly described by Agatha (II. iii. 6-9). She asks Agatha to help her to become one, though she fears it is now too late (II. iii. 120-23). She is the most sympathetic character in the play, thanks to the compassion her uncomplaining love arouses in the audience.

*Line 57. And even when she died*

That is, when Harry's wife died.

*Line 61. I am the only one who ever met her*

See note on I. i. 164, p. 187.

*Line 63. I was sorry for her*

For Harry's wife.

*Line 68. What he did to himself*

He injured himself by marrying a woman unsuited to him, whom he did not love. He married her to escape Amy and her plots for his future, particularly (perhaps) her plot to marry him to Mary. This was bitter for Mary and helps us to understand why she now knows she must leave Wishwood at last (line 70). She cannot face being in the same house as a man she loved who cared so little for her. Agatha tells her not to run away (line 74). Her courage, she tells her, is no more than fear and pride.

*Line 80. The decision will be made by powers beyond us*

Agatha has the intuition to sense that Harry is in the grip of a supernatural experience.

*Lines 119-20. But I thought I might escape from one life to another,*

*And it may be all one life, with no escape.*

Harry has returned hoping to find safety in the simple, substantial life of the happy moments of his Wishwood childhood, and to escape from the shadows of guilt and the contaminated world; but perhaps (he says) these two

## Commentary

worlds are the same, the latter growing out of the former continuously, and there is no going back and no way out.

*Lines 136-7. But what was the design? It never came off.*

Harry here seems to know, and not to know, that the design was for him to marry Mary and settle down at Wishwood under his mother's thumb. Perhaps his question 'what was the design?' is put out of delicacy towards Mary's feelings, to suggest he was unaware of the part she was supposed to play. This would make his previous behaviour less insulting. He hastens on to recall the occasions when they were really happy together, in childhood, when they even had secrets they shared with none but each other.

*Line 174. However cruel, it may be a deception.*

Harry may be deceived in thinking there is no hope for him; she has her insights into his condition, like Agatha. Hope for Harry dawns later in the play.

*Lines 176-81. The most real is what I fear . . .*

If there is nothing else than dreaming in life, the most real dream is the one he most fears, and that is the dream in which the bright colours have faded and the eye, adjusted to a twilit nightmare, sees all in terms of horror: a stone turns froglike (*batrachian*), cold, slimy, repellent. A bare branch that has lost its leaves (*aphyllous*) seems like a reptile (*ophidian*) hanging down from a tree. It is the vision of a Twice-Born soul (see Introduction pages 51-3). These words are too difficult for most audiences, and the passage is sometimes cut in performance.

*Line 182. No more real than the other*

The nightmare view of life is no more real (she says) than the glow-upon-the-world view.

*Line 186. But in this world*

The line should be accented 'But in *this* world', meaning that in the world of her normal life at Wishwood, hopes

## Commentary

arise unexpectedly, though we are not conscious of them until they declare themselves. (This rebirth of hope for Harry is at the centre of the play. See note to Part II, scene ii, line 148, p. 216).

### *Line 206. Dreaming dissolution*

His recurrent nightmare that his nature is dissolving in evil.

### *Lines 214-16. They are much too clever . . . part of the torment.*

These simple words are among the most difficult to explain. Harry seems to be saying that the spectres that he senses to be pursuing him (he has not yet actually seen them) are too cunning and (by implication) too evil to allow him the consolation of Mary's entering and sharing with him the nightmare world he shares with them. In this, as we presently see, he is wholly mistaken; for by a piece of dramatic irony, when (at the end of this scene) the Eumenides at last appear, Mary sees them as clearly as Harry does, but makes no sign of doing so, and even tells him 'There is no one here' (line 326). She does this to calm him, to make him feel he is only suffering from fancies (See note to line 326, pp. 202-3).

But if Mary cannot share his nightmare world, her own world (Harry says) is no better; he is speaking of the world of Wishwood; that world is still the death-in-life from which he had originally fled. The real difficulty of this passage comes in Harry's next phrase: *They have seen to that*. This seems to assert that Harry somehow knows that the spectres (the Eumenides) have made as much of a nightmare of Wishwood, as they have of Harry's married life. But how can he know that? What makes him suppose they were in any way connected with Wishwood?

I think this may be an instance of an overspill of the knowledge of the omniscient author into one of his characters, a kind of 'leak' allowed by him in order to pass on to



## Commentary

the audience the sense of the curse on Wishwood, that lovelessness of which Harry does not yet consciously know, but which is at the root of the family guilt; the house, he obscurely feels, is tainted by the same evil, though in some different way, as the rest of the world is. This evil, at this point in the play, he associates with the Eumenides. Hence he has the intuition that they are somehow connected in some malignant way, with Wishwood. In so far as they represent the guilt that they are pursuing him for (the guilt of the whole family, as Agatha believes) his intuition is right; but it makes him seem to know more than he could know, at this point in the play. Agatha is the one who fully understands the curse upon the family, and the nature of the Eumenides, in dealing with it and with Harry, and expounds it to the audience when she tells him

You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,  
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.

(II. ii. 137-8)

Mary's world is dominated by Amy, as Harry may be supposed to know. If, following Mr. Grover Smith's suggestion,<sup>n</sup> the Eumenides, at this point in the play (just before their first appearance) are to be associated with Amy, then Harry's intuition has made the connection without actually stating it: the Eumenides, linked with his mother, have made as bad a world for Mary as they have for him, and that 'is part of the torment' (line 216); All are involved in an inescapably evil situation. The association of Amy with the Eumenides is of course paralleled by that of Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*, for it is she (or rather her ghost) who calls them up to pursue Orestes.

*Line 229. Wishwood is a cheat*

Wishwood had seemed to promise Mary a happy mar-



## Commentary

riage, but had filched it from her by driving Harry into matrimony elsewhere.

*Lines 232-3. You attach yourself to loathing as others do to loving*

Mary's way of putting the difference between the Twice-Born and the Once-Born (See Introduction page 51).

*Line 241. Or the distant waterfall in the forest*

Compare 'the unexpected crash of the iron cataract' in line 166.

*Line 249. Is the spring not an evil time, that excites us with lying voices?*

The voices had lied to her, exciting her with a promise of love never fulfilled. Compare Eliot, *The Waste Land*, I. *The Burial of the Dead*.

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow . . .

The idea that cold snow keeps in the warmth is echoed in Mary's image of *the aconite under the snow* (line 256). Compare also *East Coker* II:

What is the late November doing  
With the disturbance of the spring  
. . . Late roses filled with early snow.

Mary is such a rose.

*Lines 258-9. Spring is an issue of blood, a season of sacrifice*

This is true of ancient Greek folk-ritual of which Eliot is partly thinking," and also, of course, of Christian ritual that celebrates the Crucifixion and Resurrection at Easter.

*Lines 274-8. And what of the terrified spirit compelled to*

## Commentary

*be reborn, to rise towards the violent sun, wet wings into the rain cloud, harefoot over the moon?*

This language of imagery has left that of conversation, as the mood of lyrical feeling has risen to transcend the daily selves of the two speakers. Mary has moved into a kind of trance or vision of what is happening to Harry — the joyful pain of his rebirth. His earthbound nature (symbolised by the wet wings of a mayfly and the deformity of a harefoot) has to rise to painful heights. A harefoot is one that is long and narrow, like a hare's. Compare the proverb quoted by Richardson in *Clarissa* II. 118, quoted O.E.D.) *Better a harefoot than none at all.*

*Line 283. You bring me news . . .*

See Introduction, pp. 31–32.

*Line 316. When I knew her, I was not the same person.*

When he knew his former wife, he had not begun to enter into the state of conversion he is now undergoing and that is changing him into another person. The accident of a moment of unreality in his past life is what has put him among the Eumenides (evil creatures, as he still believes) — the accident that he killed his wife, before the change came upon him, and before the new Harry began to be born.

*Lines 324–5. Let your necrophily feed upon that carcase.*

Necrophily means carnality in connection with corpses. Harry is hysterically asserting that the Eumenides are feasting upon his dead self, and have no right to haunt the new Harry. But they will not leave him (*'They will not go'* line 325).

*Line 326. Harry! There is no one here*

We learn later (II. iii. 108) that Mary has seen the Eumenides; as this is the only time in the play when she could have seen them, (unless we are to suppose she saw them off-stage, which is absurd), it is clear, as already

## Commentary

noted, that she now is only *pretending* not to see them, thinking by so doing to help Harry with the reassurance that they are merely an illusion from which he is temporarily suffering. But Harry takes it the other way; she is too obtuse to see them. She has failed him, so he thinks.

### *Line 331. To your nonsense*

To the idea that there was still hope of rebirth for him; believing her to be obtuse after all, incapable of sharing his experiences, he plunges away from the attraction he has begun to feel for her, as a woman. See Introduction, pp. 32-33.

### *Line 333. But they are stupid*

There is an element of stupidity in the family guilt — the simple plots to murder Amy contrived by his father (II. ii. 103), and Harry's stupidity in getting married to the wrong woman for no better reason than to escape Wishwood. Harry is of course not thinking of these examples of stupidity in his father and himself, but he senses it in the spectres as a part of *them*; the audience can recognise it as a part of *him*.

## PART I Scene 3

### *Line 24. ARTHUR and JOHN*

These characters never appear, but are a useful invention for the creation of a touch or two of comedy and minor suspense. Their witless irresponsibility freshens up the play when reported to us, and creates a kind of eagerness for their entry. This theatrical device is also used in *George and Margaret*, a popular drawing-room comedy by Gerald Savory in which George and Margaret, expected all through the play, are finally announced as about to enter as the curtain falls for the last time.

### *Line 47. Incubation of another malady*

Behind this gibe, Harry seems to mean what Alexander



## Commentary

Pope called 'this long disease my life'. (*Epistle to Arbuthnot*)  
*Lines 61-2. A murderer who suffered from an incurable cancer.*  
Dr. Warburton has scored a bulls-eye without knowing it. Harry believes he is a murderer (of his wife) and that he is suffering from a cancer (of guilt) that has attacked him. He goes on to say (lines 65-9) 'Cancer is *here*' (i.e. in one's own body) present. 'Murder was *there*' (i.e. has happened in some other place, an act in the past, outside oneself).

*Line 68. Murder a reversal of sleep and waking*

Harry is suggesting that a murderer can't believe he really committed a murder; it is more like something he has done in a dream; compare *Sweeney Agonistes*:

He didn't know if he was alive and the girl was dead  
He didn't know if the girl was alive and he was dead  
He didn't know if they both were alive or both were  
dead.

*Line 74. The past unredeemable*

See Introduction, page 55. The idea of the Redemption as understood by Christians seems never to have reached Harry; presumably he had no religious education at Wishwood. Eliot's understanding of it was first declared in *The Rock*. (See Introduction, p. 20.) It is linked with his view of Time and Eternity as expressed in *Burnt Norton* I, 4-5; it finds partial expression in the paradox spoken by the Chorus a few lines later:

*Line 95. And the past is about to happen, and the future was long since settled.*

See note on II. i. 13, p. 208.

*Lines 96-98. And the wings of the future darken the past, the beak and claws have desecrated history. Shamed the first cry in the bedroom, the noise in the nursery*

The sins that will be committed because of our fallen nature deepen our past guilt and have made human



## Commentary

history monstrous, bringing shame with it from our birth upon our nursery innocence.

*Lines 98-102. Mutilated the family album . . . broken chimney.*

The family album, full of portraits we are proud of, is shown up as a rogue's gallery; the tenants' dinner that seems so jolly, so full of good nature and largesse, is a mockery, and the family picnic on the moors, that appeared so full of natural enjoyment, is revealed in its ridiculous falsity. This omnipresent evil unroofs the house, so that we can look down into it from above and see ourselves as we really are in our privacy; perhaps there never was a roof and our doings were always open to the eye of inspection, and all our evil ways spied out. And evil is still there, perched upon our ruins.

I have dared to make this simplified paraphrase to give some easier explanation of what seems to me the general sense of the passage, the slant from which a certain perspective may be gained to interpret the varied, powerful, symbolic imagery. The passage as a whole is a summing up of the First Part in regard to its two chief purposes, namely, to give its audiences the sense of an enveloping, supernatural curse affecting them too, as well as the characters in the play, which may unsettle all normal understanding of what is called reality; and to give this experience in the language of poetry, since no other is sufficient for it.

*Line 107. The eye is on this house*

See note to line 224, p 189.

*Lines 109-110. There are three together. May the three be separated*

The trance-like ritual of mystifying imagery seems intended to create a certain stage effect, namely to re-assert, or even to produce a chill feeling or spinal tremor in the audience at the presence of evil, supernatural manifestations; Agatha seems a priestess confirming the fears of the leaderless Chorus, yet at the same time giving

## Commentary

some comfort by a strong spell or prayer that the evil may be contained and even dispelled. When it comes to explaining these sibylline utterances in detail, it is well to remember that this is a use of words to create mystery, not 'meaning', a non-naturalistic incantation that will work on the stage, and, by a kind of ceremony, create a sense of awe. Shakespeare resorts to the same device in *All's Well that Ends Well* when Helena, about to cure the King of his ailment, gives the feeling of a mystic moment by a similar trick:

... The greatest Grace lending grace,  
Ere twice the horses of the sun shall bring  
Their fiery torcher his diurnal ring,  
Ere twice in murk and occidental damp  
Moist Hesperus hath quenched his sleepy lamp, *etc.*  
(II, i, 159-63)

We need, then, not be too precise as to whose eye is on the house, or whether the 'three together' are the Eumenides (Alecto the Unresting, Megaera the Jealous and Tisiphone the Avenger) whom Agatha has not yet seen and therefore cannot know about, so long as we feel the menace of a supernatural event, the vaguer the more powerful. *The knot that was tied* (line 111) and *the crossed bones* (113) are symbols for the family curse; *the weasel and the otter* (116) seem to be symbols for the natural order disturbed by the supernatural; may they soon return to their normal ways!

### PART II Scene 1

Of this scene Eliot wrote as follows in a letter to Professor Bonamy Dobrée, dated 12 April 1939:

I think there is one fault in particular which I ought somehow to have avoided: the first scene of the second

## Commentary

part is really explicatory matter which should come earlier; and coming at that point, has the effect of interminable explanation with nothing happening. I think that the play succeeds in scenes, but not as a whole. There are some faults, certainly, militating against popular success, which I still don't know how I could have coped with in *this* play.

[I have supplied the comma after the word 'certainly' in the above.]

I am by no means sure about the chorus: I mean whether I shall look on it as a permanent element for the future, or whether it is a vestige, something the employment of which has been a help to *me* in finding the way from non-dramatic to dramatic verse.

Eliot's doubts about *The Family Reunion* remained with him to the end. In a letter to Mr. Jonathan Sale, written on 23 August 1963, we find the sentence 'I still consider it an unsuccessful play'.

*Line 5. I can imagine*

Harry — self-obsessed — supposes Dr. Warburton is going to talk about his (Harry's) condition, and that it will be useless and embarrassing, as it will be merely medical, not spiritual.

*Lines 13–14. O God, man, the things that are going to happen  
Have already happened*

We have already met this paradox in the mouths of the Chorus (I. iii. 95). Harry's irritable rudeness can only be excused if we suppose him to be still half hysterical, in the grip of terrors from a world beyond. Nevertheless the paradox is not to be considered as simple nonsense, but as an epigram based in a partly deterministic philosophy, that has a Christian basis and can be traced back at least as far as Boethius (c. A.D. 470–525), in the fifth Book of his



## Commentary

*Consolation of Philosophy.* To speak briefly of so intricate an argument, we must distinguish two modes of Time (1) the mode apprehended by human beings as an endless extension of Past, Present and Future. We live in or experience the present, but the Past (once so real) is lost to us (except in our flimsy memories) and the Future is not yet attained. So that we never see or experience *Whole Time*; this is because we live *in* it. But if we can imagine a Being not confined to the thin line of endless succession we call Time, but able to apprehend another mode of Time, namely (2) Eternity, in which All Time is perceived in one infinite glance ('a never-fading instant' Boethius calls it) this Being would see All that Is in one simultaneous but eternal gaze, and Alpha would be as immediately present to him as Omega. To God there is neither Present, Past, nor Future; but one eternal act of omniscience. Hence God's knowledge seems to us what we, in Time, have to call foreknowledge or providence; but for Him who comprehends all, no instant of reality can be lost. Otherwise existence would fail to exist.

Within this foreknowledge (as we, living in Time, are forced to think of it) all that happens must be foreseen and therefore predetermined; therefore there can be no free will (other than the will of God). This seems to be a head-on collision for those who live in Time, as we do. Since we cannot experience the dimension of eternity (we can only barely formulate the idea) we cannot tell how the clash is resolved on the eternal plane in the divine knowledge. While asserting God's omniscience, catholic Christianity also asserts man's free will, and, through the centuries, Christians of various shades of opinion have inclined to stress this freedom or its opposite, predestination, according to the fashions of theology.

Eliot in some respects favours a predestinarian position, inasmuch as he seems convinced that certain souls are



## Commentary

'called' to sainthood and martyrdom; in Becket's sermon in *Murder in the Cathedral* we are told

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint. . . . A martyrdom is always the design of God . . . for the true martyr is he . . . who has lost his will in the will of God. . . .

This suggests a kind of collaboration between God and man, a voluntary acceptance on the human side of a God-ordained event. To put the paradox another way, man's free choice is real and is therefore present in God's omniscience, like the rest of reality.

As has been observed in the Introduction, Harry seems to know little or nothing about Christianity, and this is explainable (as I have suggested) on the grounds of his Wishwood upbringing; it is also explainable on the ground of Eliot's design to preach a Christian sermon in this play without mentioning Christianity; here, in little, we see an analogy to our argument; Harry's nature, apparently of its own accord, exactly chimes in with his Creator's quite different purposes.

Our argument also has a bearing on the Redemption. Harry seems only to have heard of the idea negatively; he has told us 'Everything is irrevocable, the past unredeemable' (I. iii. 73-74). He, a creature in Time, gazing at his past, sees the reality of his sin. It cannot be denied. What's done cannot be undone. But the Redemption (like every other act in Time) is also an act in Eternity, and if the things that are going to happen have already happened, then the things that have already happened are also just going to happen. The Redemption is *now*, and includes all that we who live in Time see as Past, Present and Future.

## Commentary

This is the underlying thought in the obscurities of *Burnt Norton*. It is a poem profoundly intertwined with *The Family Reunion*, and preceded it by some four years (1935-9). Some of their similarities will be mentioned in these notes. At the moment it is sufficient to quote the opening of the poem:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.

But, by a change of symbol, thinking of time not as a straight line, but as a turning wheel, there is the wheel's centre, which is motionless; (compare *Murder in the Cathedral*, Part I, lines 598-9, That the pattern may persist, that the wheel may turn and still be for ever still). So, in *Burnt Norton*:

At the still point of the turning world . . .  
Where past and future are gathered . . .  
. . . Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

This still point that makes all else move is the symbol of God's love

Love is itself unmoving  
Only the cause and end of movement.

And we are told this 'end' precedes the beginning

Or say that the end precedes the beginning  
And the end and the beginning were always there  
Before the beginning and after the end.  
And all is always now.

## Commentary

So we are brought back to the opening sentence of the Gospel of St. John to envision the Redemption as a thing established from everlasting — in the beginning the word was<sup>n</sup> — with Time redeemed before it began. These things are mysteries, not only in Eliot's poetry.

*Lines 14-17. That is in a sense true . . . to the future.*

Dr. Warburton is a wise old gentleman, but I do not think the metaphysical points we have just considered in the previous note were in his mind. I would rather suppose he means 'Although you do not have my medical knowledge, it is true enough that people in your mother's condition may die at any moment; this is going to happen to her (if she gets a shock) and has happened all through history; it will make a permanent difference to you in the future if she should die now because of something harsh you might say or do to her in ignorance of the danger she is in.'

*Line 73. Has only left a cautery*

The mark of a wound that has healed after being seared (to eliminate infection) by cauterizing it with a red-hot iron instrument, called a cautery.

*Line 81. A summer day of unusual heat*

This phrase curiously recurs at II. ii. 90. But they cannot have been the same day, for on the earlier occasion of its use Harry lost his butterfly net, whereas on the later he had not yet been born. I can only suppose it an accident in composition and that Eliot liked the phrase, but forgot he had already used it.

*Line 95. I felt the trap close.*

He had been kept apart from his father (line 65), but as long as his father was still alive he was not solely possessed by his powerful mother. Now there was no other court of appeal.

*Line 121. Well!*

Harry's ejaculation seems to mean 'Is that all you had to tell me? What a fuss about so little!'



## Commentary

*Line 153. If Sergeant Winchell is real.*

This sounds like a joke, but it is a part of Harry's hysteria.

*Line 161. Her Ladyship's!*

Harry's guilty mind at once leaps to the thought, not of his mother, but of his wife; he has (he thinks) murdered her; and here are the police come for him. Can they be real? (Compare the final chorus of *Sweeney Agonistes* 'for you know the hangman's waiting for you'.)

*Line 176. Do you know or don't you?*

Do you know I murdered her or not? I'm not afraid of you! (But perhaps he is a little, or he would not have denied it; he has, however, greater fears to cope with, having seen the Eumenides. These are the ideas underlying Harry's curious remarks to Sergeant Winchell in this scene. He says he might surprise him — by introducing him to the supernatural. This remark may have an element of grim joke about it.)

*Line 262.*

Here begins the only moment of tenderness between Harry and Amy; she takes sides with him (of course) as against her younger sisters, and is feeling for a way of understanding her strange son; she does so by catching his resemblance to his father (line 275), and this touches both her and him, and for the first and last time in the entire play, Harry has an instant of thinking about others rather than himself; he realises she is very tired and uses his authority ('I shall make you lie down') in just the way that will give her most pleasure. *As if he were Master of Wish-wood.* Agatha appreciates this too (lines 279-80). Harry's speech on his return (line 320) concludes this brief episode of tenderness.

*Line 337. But it begins to seem just part of some huge disaster*

Compare Cardinal Newman's phrase, quoted in the Introduction, page 46 'the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity'.



## Commentary

*Lines 350-4. We cannot rest . . . suffer more.*

It is not enough to listen in silence to Violet's malice or hear of Arthur's stupidity; we must push onwards into the world of our imaginations and terrors, and learn to suffer more. Agatha utters the typically 'twice-born' belief that you can achieve your salvation by suffering. Redemption and forgiveness are no part of her austere creed. She believes in expiation.

*Line 356. Do you think that I believe what I said just now?*

Harry seems to refer to his remarks between line 332 and 339. At one time he had simply thought there was something wrong with *him*, but now he thinks the whole universe is in disaster; and that is what he would like to believe, because if it were only that, he could cheat the nightmare by getting medical help (e.g. drugs) or by escaping (to some ivory tower). But the horror is that it is *reality* (not to be escaped); the inescapable self, *the thing he is*, is foul. There is no redemption or way out.

*Line 412. The agony in the curtained bedroom*

The Chorus has intuitions issuing from the subconscious in symbols not entirely different from those used by Harry with his 'unspoken voice of sorrow in the ancient bedroom' (I. i. 308), and his longing thoughts of childhood seem reflected in the remarks of the Chorus here about 'The treble voices on the lawn' (line 414); so too they share with him 'the moment of sudden loathing' (line 421) and 'the season of stifled sorrow' (422). Where the Chorus differs (in these respects) from Harry is in their view that 'There is nothing at all to be done about it'; Harry will 'go out into the wilderness' to do something about it.

*Line 429. And whether in Argos or in England*

See Introduction page 38.

*Line 431. In the nature of music*

Perhaps because of the recurrence of unalterable themes in different keys with endless imitations and repetitions.

## Commentary

### PART II Scene 2

#### *Line 13. I can guess . . . the future*

Agatha can guess that Harry takes no interest in Wishwood (the past) and that Harry has some prospect of a quite different sort of life before him; but she does not grasp the nature of his present disturbed state, which links them.

#### *Line 18. Their meaning*

The meaning of the Eumenides.

#### *Line 22. That is one hell*

Loneliness, separation from love at the very outset of his marriage ('eight years ago').

#### *Line 25. The second hell*

The sense of being parted from that real self, innocent and capable of joy, that he had experienced at moments in his childhood at Wishwood. (Compare what Mary says of his real self, I. ii. 195-6.) It was a sense of happy participation in life that had suddenly become a sense of seeing himself as an object existing in its contamination.

#### *Line 29. When I was inside the old dream*

The dream of his isolation; in which he felt depersonalised, but contaminated; he felt no remorse at what he had done (in murdering his wife, as he supposes he did) but it repeated itself endlessly in his mind. (Compare *Sweeney Agonistes*, Sweeney's last speech.)

#### *Line 35. When I was outside*

At moments when he no longer felt this dream of being parted from himself and contaminated, the death of his wife seemed to have nothing to do with him, though it was real enough; he could go back to Wishwood, forget about it, and start again.

#### *Line 39. But they prevent it*

The Eumenides will not allow him this easy way out.

## Commentary

*Lines 41-5. Here I have been finding a misery long forgotten, . . . I want you to tell me about my father.*

The topic of Harry's father has already shown itself as prominent in Harry's mind, as if in a knowledge of his father's life lay the clue to the guilts that pursue him. 'I want to know more about my father' he tells Dr. Warburton (II. i. 63). Warburton tells him his father and mother were not happy together (II. i. 74-5). Warburton also (unintentionally) tells him that Agatha could explain, by his remark *I advise you strongly, not to ask your aunt* (II. i. 97). He immediately tries to cover up the hint he has let slip by adding '*I mean, there is nothing she could tell you.*' This is a white lie of Warburton's. But Harry is not deceived by it; he is now trying to follow his clue in the direction blurted out by the doctor.

*Line 61. The liberated from the human wheel.*

Compare I. i. 336. This use of wheel-imagery differs from that discussed in the note on II. i. 13; here and at I. i. 336 Harry uses it to describe a human soul attached to worldly life and its cares and terrors (not freed by yielding the will into the will of God; Harry does not yet understand this further point, but it is in Eliot's mind).

*Line 120. Everything is true in a different sense*

Compare I. i. 343. A truth that keeps forcing itself upon him.

*Lines 122-5. Everything tends . . . seemed the ruin.*

Harry means that in the light of what he is now learning, the course of his life falls into position for him as naturally and as inevitably as trees and stones fall by the law of gravity. In the end we see the pattern; if, in the obvious sense of the words, Agatha had been Harry's mother (by adultery with Harry's father), it would have ruined the life of Wishwood; now, in the non-obvious sense of the words, Agatha can claim to be Harry's mother (for the reasons she gives) and that is being completed in the relationship.



## Commentary

they are establishing between themselves as they speak.  
*Lines 126-7. Perhaps my life . . . minds of others.*

His life has been the battle-ground of the wills of Amy, Agatha and his father. Whatever has happened to him has originated in them.

*Lines 127-8. Perhaps I only dreamt I pushed her.*

For once Harry and Aunt Agatha are in agreement with Uncle Charles; (compare I. i. 404-5).

*Line 130. Sin and expiation*

That sin can be expiated vicariously is an ancient and wide-spread religious view, by no means confined to Christianity. In classical Greece, as in many other times and places, prisoners could be put to torture and sacrificed as scapegoats for the community. But in Christianity it must be a willing and conscious sacrifice, knowledge of which (as Agatha says) must precede expiation. She has just given him the knowledge he needs and she goes on to explain that he is perhaps a sin-bearer for his family, now that he knows the story of the lovelessness that caused his guilt, all of which must be paid for.

*Line 138. Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame*

The reference to Purgatory is the only openly Christian allusion in the play.

*Line 141. The enchantment*

The spell of the family curse.

*Line 148. In a different vision*

Compare the following from a letter from Eliot to Mrs. Faber of 24 February, 1938:

But there is hope for Harry — the hope of learning to want something different, rather than of getting anything he wanted.

*Lines 148-9. This is like an end. And a beginning.*

Compare *East Coker* (1940), the opening line. 'In my beginning is my end'.



## Commentary

*Line 157. There's relief from a burden I carried*

The burden of the family secret and her part in it.

*Line 172. When other people seemed so strong . . .*

He is thinking of Amy chiefly, but perhaps also of Agatha (compare line 161).

*Lines 161-82. You, frightened! . . . pain from prison.*

A long speech, which, starting simply, develops in Harry's obscurest manner. To offer the gist of the first sixteen lines, one might say that what Agatha has told Harry about his father and mother and herself has illuminated his whole understanding of the family, so that compassion and even affection for it and for his mother have become at least possible for him. Up till that moment he had only felt family affection as a formal duty that one was obliged to accept as a convention to keep the family going; it was like a part in a play, able to be performed without any real inner feeling; he had been so well schooled in it that during the past ten years (from the years shortly before his marriage until then, a year after his wife's death) he had been able to keep up pretences, even with regard to his wife — we have been told by Downing that he 'seemed very anxious about my Lady. Tried to keep her in when the weather was rough, Didn't like to see her lean over the rail (I. i. 521-3) — and had found, on his return to Wishwood an hour or so before, yet another part for which he had been cast and costumed in advance by his indomitable mother; but her strength of mind had 'stifled his decision' to conform. He had intended to follow the appointed pattern, but, on seeing the family determination that confronted him, the intention stuck in his throat, and he threw pretences aside. If, however he had only known before what Agatha has just told him, he might have felt the stirrings of real affection for his mother — not that she would have wished for it; what she cared about was the continuation of Wishwood under its proper hereditary

## Commentary

head, without change. Affection was neither here nor there. This seems to be what Harry implies, about his return for a family reunion.

He then turns to his own psychological condition, and obscurities begin. I understand his words as follows: *Now I see I have been wounded in a war of phantoms, not by human beings*. He had been the victim, not of people, (like Amy, the family and his wife), but of conventional notions (like the pretence of family affection, the duty to maintain Wishwood, the formal dance of attendance upon his wife and her globe-trotting whims, the demand that he should take his position in the county and other such phantom obligations, which, in conflict with him and with each other, had injured the whole course of his life). The other people involved in this conflict — his family — had no more power than he had against social conventions.

But these conventions, which he had thought real, he now perceives to be shadows, things of no real importance, whereas the things he had thought to be his private fantasy (the Eumenides) he now sees to be a manifestation of reality itself. They are the embodiment of a spiritual world absolutely real, and not (as he had feared) symptoms of his personal insanity. The *awful privacy of the insane mind* is a terror he had been facing ever since he had begun to feel 'that sense of separation, of isolation unredeemable, irrevocable' (II. ii. 20-21); but now he knows that he is not mad after all; he can declare himself in public; it may be painful to do so, but he is at least a free man, not shut off from other men by the loss of his reason, which puts one beyond the reach of communication, in the private cells of a madman's mind.

In other words, the phantoms that had injured him are those of the material world of Wishwood (image of a sterile, godless civilisation) and the things that he had supposed to be private phantoms (the sense of sin con-



## Commentary

veyed through the Eumenides) are the reality that can guide his life. This, though painful, is sanity and freedom.

*Lines 183-6. I only looked . . . flew over.*

Compare *Burnt Norton*

Footfalls echo in the memory

Down the passage which we did not take

Towards the door we never opened

Into the rose-garden . . .

So we moved . . .

To look down into the drained pool . . .

And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,

And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly . . .

Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

The situation is the same; the cloud in the poem takes the place of the raven in the play in the imagery.

*Lines 190-194. Over and under . . . over and under.*

A very condensed passage; the echo is above (*over*) and the scrape of the sharp heel below (*under*); she was only conscious of her feet moving and of the eye watching. Is it an intentionally ambiguous use of grammar that gives one pause to ask whose is the eye, her own? or the eye of some omnipresent and unwinking being, to be identified or in some way associated with the haunting eyes of the Eumenides (I. i. 224 and 236)? and with 'the single eye above the desert' (II. ii. 200)? It may be suggested that all these eyes are in a sense the same, the *Oculus Dei*. God speaks within us, in our consciences, as well as seeming to observe us from outside, and it is conscience that fixes the movement of Agatha's feet, away from the love of a created being (Harry's father); the movement is ordained from within and without, over and under.

*Lines 195-199*

Harry matches his experience with hers, reiterating and intensifying what he had said in I. i. 320-29, his vision of

## Commentary

sin. *Until the chain broke*; the chain that chained him to the human wheel (II. ii. 61). Agatha repeats the imagery, and so does Harry, giving the effect of a refrain, at lines 205 and 210.

### *Line 208. The clasping branches*

Harry is still thinking in terms of reptiles to describe his experiences; compare I. ii. 181.

### *Lines 210-13. The chain breaks*

We are mounting to the crisis of the play, Harry's liberation through the understanding of his part in the story of the curse; he has come out into the light under the eye of God or Conscience that gives final judgment; he feels himself cleansed, by knowledge, as a body is cleansed by vomiting or excretion (*evacuation*). He is in a state of excitement in which he cannot be explicit, and can only think in images.

### *Lines 214-17. I was not there . . . rose-garden*

In the extreme excitement of this mystical moment, Harry rises to a blend of symbolism and paradox hard to interpret. Essentially it seems to me that Agatha's confession of love and renunciation have so opened Harry's eyes to reality that the he and she which had passed through the hells described now seemed mere *phantasms* (semblances) of their true selves; but now the chains are broken and the prisoners free, and they run towards each other, almost like lovers in this new-found intimacy; so that what had not happened between her and his father had come true in a different sense between her and him and the wilderness has become the rose-garden in preparation for the second visit of the Eumenides, when the Avengers become the Bright Angels; they will lead him back into the wilderness, but one transfigured by new purpose. On this passage there is a striking comment in the letter (already quoted in part) from Eliot to Martin Browne:"



## Commentary

Now, this attraction towards Mary has stirred him up, but, owing to his mental state, is incapable of developing. therefore he finds a refuge in an ambiguous relation: the attraction, half as a son, half as a lover, to Agatha who reciprocates in somewhat the same way. And this gives the cue for the second appearance of the Furies, more patently in their role as divine messengers, to let him know clearly that the only way out is purgation and holiness.

Agatha and Harry have met but not through the expected doors, nor will they return through them.

*Lines 221-3. Relief from what happened . . . in waking*

Agatha has experienced relief from what had so long oppressed her by confessing to Harry, and this has freed her too, from the craving for her lost love, which only her dreams could flatter her with in sleep, 'but waking no such matter.'

*Line 233. This time, you are real*

See note on lines 161-82, page 218, paragraph 3.

*Lines 239-40. And I know . . . one destination.*

• He knows there is only the way of dispossession. Compare *Burnt Norton*.

In order to arrive at what you do not KNOW  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not.

*Lines 241-2. A curse comes into being as a child is formed.*

To be understood 'in the same way as' a child is formed.

*Line 250. Or under an elder tree*

The choice of tree is sinister; according to tradition, Judas hanged himself upon an elder tree.

## Commentary

Iudas he japide with Iewene silver,  
And sithen on an Eldir hongide him aftir.

*Piers Plowman A Text, I, 65–6 (approx. 1362)*

*(The Father of Falsehood) fooled Judas with the Jews' silver and then hanged him after on an elder tree.*

*Lines 255–7. Accident is design . . . cloud of unknowing.*

In our ignorance we cannot know what is accident and what design in the pattern of growth. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a late 14th- or early 15th- century religious treatise about the concentration of all the faculties of the soul in union with God:

the first tyme when thou dost it, thou fyndest  
bot a derknes, & as it were *a cloude of unknowyng* —  
this derknes and this cloude is, however thou dost,  
betwix thee & thi God . . .

*Lines 258–9. O my child . . . fulfilled.*

Harry will bring the curse to completion by the expiation he is about to undertake. He was 'child' and 'curse'.

*Lines 266–7. Love compels cruelty to those who do not understand love.*

An utterance prophetic of Harry's later behaviour to his mother, whose death is brought about by his abrupt departure. Yet he left at the call of a greater love.

*Line 269. Mean the end of a relation, make it impossible*

The relationship, enjoyed in the brief scene that has just passed, is at an end; it is Agatha's second abnegation, confirming her in the ascetic life; Harry has to go his own journey into the same kind of fulfilment, the only way out of the defilement. It is the way of dispossession, of detachment, of divesting themselves of the love of created beings.

*Line 296. Until I come again*

If he should return, however, it will be too late for him to see his mother again. Eliot wrote to Mrs. Faber on 21 Febru-

## Commentary

ary 1938; the letter makes this remark: 'No pistol-shots in this play. Harry may come back to Wishwood in forty years' time. No death but Amy's, and she had a weak heart.'

*Line 318. I am not safe here.*

He might become enmeshed in the death-in-life of Wishwood. The Wishwood family are the fugitives.

*Line 319. In a world of fugitives*

Fugitives from the spiritual realities that have been revealed in the play.

*Lines 341-5. Why I have this election — bright angels.*

'Election' here is used as a technical term in theology, to mean that Harry is aware of having been chosen, or 'elected' by God's providence for a special vocation (see Introduction p. 21). Harry is saying he does not understand why God has singled him out for what lies before him, but that it was long since pre-ordained for him, and he now sees that it is what he most wanted; in other words Harry's will welcomes its surrender to the will of God; much strength is demanded of him, but the demand itself gives him strength enough. In the appearance of the Eumenides he now has seen his purpose in life; they are there no longer to hound him, but to lead him; they are no longer foul, but bright. He will find in himself the strength to follow them.

### PART II Scene 3

*Line 40. Because of the misery that he has left behind him*

Her own and Mary's.

*Lines 87-88. He is in great danger . . . but I tell you I know.*

She has seen the Eumenides, but only in their terrifying aspect.

*Line 95. Here the death*

The death-in-life of Wishwood.



## Commentary

*Line 97. Harry has crossed the frontier*

The frontier between a naturally and a supernaturally directed life, that may end in martyrdom, and where the danger is not death, or discomfort, but evil.

*Line 114. You remember what I said to you?*

See I. ii. 71.

*Lines 117-18. Of course it was much too late then, for anything to come to me*

It was too late for any hope of Harry's asking her to marry him, she thinks; but in fact, he came near to it, but the Eumenides appeared to prevent him.

*Line 149. To become a missionary*

An astounding leap of Amy's intuition, considering all things; she has taken in and digested Harry's vague self-poetising at the end of the previous scene, picked upon his phrase

A care over lives of humble people

and translated the whole unheard-of situation into the practical terms of a career it had never entered her head to imagine for him before. She is even a jump ahead of Harry in the matter.

*Line 205. The bull-dog in the Burlington Arcade*

The Burlington Arcade is a covered way, with shops on either side, joining Piccadilly and Burlington Gardens, in London. In 1939 there was a shop, towards the northern end, that had a stuffed bull-dog prominently displayed, which is still remembered by many. It had been, in life, a pet of the owner of the shop. The shop was bombed during the war and, together with the dog, destroyed.

*Line 206. What if every moment . . .*

Uncle Charles means how exciting life would be if our imagination were always on the alert and capable of surprise. One of his better sayings.



## Commentary

*Lines 227-8. We most of us seem . . . something inside them*

Downing, like Eliot, divides the world into the leaders and the led. See Introduction page 21.

*Line 259. Arthur's telegram*

Notice the delicate balance of the see-saw between gravity and farce in this excellent scene, that starts with a set-to between Amy and Agatha, and turns to irrepressible comedy with Violet's suggestion that Harry should put himself under instruction with the vicar; turns serious again when Harry says good-bye, and still more so, and more humanly so, when Downing speaks of his life as Harry's guardian, and how he feels it is nearing its end; then suddenly the scene explodes into farce with Arthur's preposterous birthday telegram, the instant before Amy's dramatic death-call:

*Agatha! Mary! come!*

*The clock has stopped in the dark!*

It is a scene richer than one can immediately take in; for instance it is a fine piece of perception that Amy who has just fought with Agatha and snubbed Mary ('you can try, but you will not succeed', lines 77-78) and who has loudly declared that she prefers the company of Violet to any other member of her family, malicious though she be (line 192), should call, at her death, for Agatha and Mary, those who had loved Harry as well in their way as she had in hers.

*Lines 282-300. We understand the ordinary business . . . much about thinking.*

An almost exactly parallel passage occurs in *The Dry Salvages* (1941), in its fifth movement, where Eliot again lists the various ploys of mankind (from news about the Loch Ness Monster, through various kinds of minor sorcery, and to other 'pastimes and drugs and features of the press') and concludes with another formulation of the

## Commentary

thought deeply embedded in *The Rock* and *The Family Reunion*:

But to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint —  
No occupation either, but something given  
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,  
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.

This is the theme that has preoccupied Eliot since *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

*Line 304. The Standing Stones*

I do not know what stones Eliot had in mind, but there are many prehistoric groups of standing stones that give an eerie effect, as if some unknown presence lurked behind them.

*Line 305. Beyond the Heavyside Layer*

The English physicist, Oliver Heaviside (1850–1925) 'suggested the presence of a conducting layer in the upper atmosphere which prevents electromagnetic waves spreading out into space'. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th edn.). The Chorus is listing, in ever-widening rings, regions in which increasing mysteries may lurk. Once again one notices that they have a collective imagination to which none of them, singly, can rise.

*Lines 318–42.*

As can be seen from the stage-directions which immediately precede this liturgical duet, Eliot is again using theatrical devices — and why not, since he is writing for the theatre? — like the circling of the table clockwise and the blowing out of candles, to create a sense of mystery; the words spoken are intended to intensify this with enough intelligibility to affirm the existence of strange powers of evil that operate 'in the nether world' to enmesh

## Commentary

our souls. The 'nether world' could, perhaps, mean some region in our Unconscious, or in some other unspecifiable source of evil in the universe. But nothing explicit is being said; rather, a mood of awe is being created as at I. iii. 107, the note on which will also serve for this passage. It is a quite different way of using language from the way Eliot uses it in (say) the mystical discussions between Harry and Amy or Agatha. There the 'meaning' is intellectual, here the 'meaning' is the mood.

*Line 342. This way the pilgrimage*

This reassuring coda rounds off the experience of the play with hope; there is a letter however from Eliot to Martin Browne, dated Easter Eve 1956, in which he says:

I have had an interview with Brook,<sup>n</sup> and told him he could cut Agatha's final rune at the end of Act I and the final rune of Act II — didn't we find that the play was more dramatic without them? and the final curtain down the moment the audience has taken in Denham and the birthday cake.

Mr. Brook did not in fact take advantage of this permission, as he found the lines theatrically valid.

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Notes  
*To the Introduction and  
Commentary*

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# Notes

## *To the Introduction and Commentary*

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### INTRODUCTION

- page 14 *To body forth the forms of things unknown*. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. i. 14–15.
- 18 *St. John of the Cross*. A Spanish mystical ascetic born in 1542, who wrote, both in prose and verse, about the experiences of the soul in its search for union with God. He died in 1591.
- 21 A point first made by Dame Helen Gardner in *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, p. 140.
- 23 *The sixtieth birthday of Amy*. For Eliot's notes on Amy's age, see the CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS AT WISHWOOD, page 235.
- 25 *The government of a woman's College*. On Agatha's talent for so high an office I do not feel able to comment, but I can quote Dame Helen Gardner's well-informed observation:

As for Agatha, she is quite incredible as 'the efficient principal of a woman's college', and it is difficult to believe in the efficiency if she really had to spend as much of her energy as she suggests in 'trying not to dislike women'. I cannot imagine any body of Fellows in the world consenting to her election as Principal.

*The Art of T. S. Eliot* (1949), page 156.

## Notes

- page 29 *Just before a party too.* A phrase from *Sweeney Agonistes*, first fragment; Doris has just drawn the Two of Spades ('That's the COFFIN!') when she is expecting a party of gentlemen friends.
- 32 *A letter to Martin Browne.* Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (1947) pp. 167-8.
- 39 *Though the parallel was not exact.* Eliot's understanding of classical myth and ritual in drama were largely derived from F. M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, first printed in 1914, reprinted in 1934. Eliot wrote to Hallie Flanagan on 18 March 1933, saying it was important for her to read this work before attempting the production of *Sweeney Agonistes*.
- 41 *The objective correlative.* A famous critical phrase coined by Eliot and to be found in his essay on *Hamlet and his Problems* in *The Sacred Wood*. He uses it to mean 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experiences, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.'
- 42 *Find out the remedy.* Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* II. ii. 73.

Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once,  
And he that might the vantage best have took  
Found out the remedy.

- 52 *All manner of thing shall be well.* See the concluding lines of Eliot's *Little Gidding*, taken in turn from the *Revelations of Divine Love* by the authoress Julian of Norwich, set down by her in 1373; in chapter 27 we find:



## Notes

It is sooth that sin is cause of all this pain;  
but all shall be well, and all shall be well,  
and all manner of thing shall be well.

page 53 *His work was almost certainly known to Eliot.* In support of this I have the privilege of quoting a letter of 20 April 1968, from Mrs. T. S. Eliot, in answer to some questions of mine:

'I would say T.S.E. was steeped in the technical theology of the Fall doctrine and had a tremendous knowledge of Anglo-Catholic writing generally. . . . In 1930 . . . again he writes: "Theology is the one most exciting and adventurous subject left for a jaded mind" '.

'Original Sin was a natural preoccupation given his background and temperament. His background was much the same as Hawthorne's "both in physical and theological environment. As a matter of fact his first ancestor in America and mine both engaged in the pursuit of hanging witches in Salem". His intense nature loathed Unitarianism, the family faith, and he often speculated in later years . . . "what line my experience might have taken had I been brought up in a form of worship from which the office of the imagination and of the aesthetic emotions had not been so ruthlessly evicted".'

55 *The Unities.* The so-called Unities of Time, Place and Action, more or less invented by Renaissance scholars out of their studies in the classics, especially in Aristotle. The Unity of Time (24 hours in tragedy, 36 in comedy) forbade the action of the play to be extended over longer than a day and a half. The Unity

## Notes

page 55 of *Space* forbade the locality of an action to extend over more than one room (very convenient for drawing-room comedies, saving much expense in scenery) or at most one city. The Unity of action forbade more than one main action (no sub-plots). These Unities, which are great nonsense, and were certainly not observed in ancient Greece, still less by Shakespeare except in *The Tempest*), were a great fetish to critics and some playwrights (notably Racine), and are even now sometimes quoted with approval, though proved absurd by Dr. Johnson in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, and by common experience in any theatre or film. However, they give a sort of 'neatness' and economy to a play (minimal virtues).

189 *Divine instruments*. See note to Part II. ii. 214–7, where the phrase is quoted from a letter of Eliot's to Martin Browne. This letter has already been quoted in part, see note to page 32.

193 *King Lear* IV. vii. 47.

200 *Mr Grover Smith's suggestion*. See Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (1962) page 206.

201 *Greek folk-ritual* see note to page 39.

211 *In the beginning the word was*. Dr. E. V. Rieu's (Penguin) version of the famous sentence that opens the Gospel of St. John.

220 *Martin Browne*. See note to page 32.

227 *Brook*. i.e. Mr. Peter Brook, the theatrical director.

# Chronological Table of Events at Wishwood

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*(Based on inferences from the text of the play, and on the supposition that, since it was designed to seem a play about contemporary events, the opening scene of Harry, Lord Monchensey's return to Wishwood took place in 1939), when, in fact, the play was first performed.*

1874(?) DOCTOR WARBURTON BORN. (At I. iii. 53, page 114, he claims to have had 40 years of medical experience. Supposing him to have qualified at the age of 25, he would have been 65 in 1939. This accounts for his fatherly attitude towards Harry and indicates the sort of make-up an actor playing Dr. Warburton should attempt.

1879 AMY BORN. (The authority for this is a letter from Eliot to Mrs. Faber dated '8 March' (probably 1938 or 9) in which he says:

as her eldest son is 30 I meant her to be sixty — she married at 30 and her husband I imagine as having been 27 at the time: it seems appropriate that she should have been rather older than he, and that she married him rather than vice versa.

Eliot changed his mind, or made a miscalculation about the age of her eldest son (Harry) and the date of her marriage. She accuses Agatha of having

## *Chronological Table*

stolen her husband thirty-five years before (II. iii. 4-5, page 158), which brings us to 1904; we know she was then pregnant with Harry, her first child, due in 3 months' time (II. ii. 107, page 147), having been three years childless before the birth of Harry (II. ii. 85, page 146). That brings us to 1900-1 as the date of her marriage (not 1909 as Eliot's letter suggests) Mr. Martin Browne informs me that in the Harvard collection of Eliot manuscripts there is a note in Eliot's hand, later, in his opinion, than the letter to Mrs. Faber quoted above, giving the following ages: Amy 60-70; Ivy 62; Violet 58; Agatha 50-60; Harry 32-5; Mary 29.

1876 HARRY'S FATHER, LORD MONCHENSEY, BORN. (Eliot's letter quoted above states he was three years younger than Amy.)

1880(?) IVY BORN (Dramatis Personae places her first of Amy's sisters; this date is calculated from what we know of Agatha).

1881(?) VIOLET BORN (calculated as above).

1884(?) AGATHA BORN. (In II. ii. 88, page 146, we are told Agatha was an undergraduate at Oxford when Amy was first pregnant (1904). She was therefore something between 18 and 22. To refine upon this, we know from II. iii. 8, page 158), that she had been thirty years a don at a female college; 30 years from 1939 brings us to 1909; there was thus a five-year pause between her undergraduate days and her election to a fellowship, a reasonable space. If she was (say) 20 in 1904, and 25 when she was elected, it would mean she was born in 1884, and this enables us to fit in Ivy and Violet, three and four years her senior, and make it more natural for Harry to address the elder sisters as



## *Chronological Table*

Aunt Ivy and Aunt Violet, but Agatha as Agatha (I. i. 242).

1900-1 AMY MARRIES LORD MONCHENSEY, HARRY'S FATHER. (See note under AMY BORN.)

1904 AGATHA AND HARRY'S FATHER FALL IN LOVE (II. ii. 90-98, pp. 146-7) on 'a summer day of unusual heat', thirty-five years before the play opens (II. iii. 4, page 158).

1904 THE CURSE BEGINS. HARRY'S FATHER PLANS TO MURDER AMY (II. ii. 102-4, page 147).

1904 HARRY BORN TOWARDS CHRISTMAS (II. ii. 100-107, page 147).

1905-6(?) JOHN (HARRY'S YOUNGER BROTHER) BORN. Inferred from II. iii. 17, page 159, where we learn that Lord Monchensey deserted Amy in 1907-8.

1906-7 ARTHUR (HARRY'S YOUNGEST BROTHER) BORN. Inferred as above.

1907-8 LORD MONCHENSEY DESERTS AMY. (II. iii. 17, page 159.)

1909 AGATHA BECOMES A DON AT A WOMEN'S COLLEGE (II. iii. 8, page 158).

1909(?) MARY BORN (I. i. 73, page 70).

1910(?) LORD MONCHENSEY DIES ABROAD (II. i. 77, page 124). Inferred from the remark that Harry was only a boy at the time and that he would not remember. If the fact of his father's death had been deliberately kept from him, one might extend 'only a boy at the time' to 1913, but hardly later than that, since (had he thought of it that way) Eliot could have contrived a spectacular death for him in the 1914-18 war.

1927(?) MARY BECOMES AN UNDERGRADUATE AT AGATHA'S COLLEGE (I. ii. 32, page 98).

1929 HARRY ENGAGES DOWNING AS HIS CHAUFFEUR (I. i. 475, page 90).

- 31 LAST PREVIOUS FAMILY REUNION (I. i. 106, page 72, confirmed I. i. 186, page 75). It seems clear that Harry was still at Wishwood then, aged 26-27, but left during the year and married a wife (whose name we never learn), who 'would never have been one of the family' (I. i. 167, page 75).
- 1931 HARRY ABANDONS WISHWOOD AND MARRIES (II. iii. 57-60, page 160). (I assume the purpose of his leaving Wishwood was to marry.)
- 1931 HARRY BECOMES AWARE OF THE SUPERNATURAL WORLD (II. ii. 19-22, pp. 143-4).
- 1932 MARY ADVISED BY AGATHA TO TRY FOR A FELLOWSHIP (I. ii. 36-37, page 98). This seems to confirm the idea that Harry married in 1932. Agatha, seeing it hopeless for Mary because of Harry's marriage, as it had been for herself because of Harry's father's marriage, presses her to take the same course she had herself taken; but Amy's will was stronger.
- 1932-8 MARY REMAINS AT WISHWOOD DOMINATED BY AMY (I. ii. 47-54, page 99).
- 1938 HARRY'S WIFE DROWNED ON AN ATLANTIC CROSSING (I. i. 147 and 156, page 74).
- 1938 HARRY THINKS HE PUSHED HIS WIFE OVERBOARD (I. i. 338, page 83).
- 1938 HARRY BEGINS TO FEEL HIMSELF PURSUED (II. ii. 32-40, page 144 also II. ii. 305-6, page 155).
- 1939 HARRY RETURNING TO WISHWOOD FOR HIS MOTHER'S BIRTHDAY AND IN HOPE TO ESCAPE HIS PURSUERS, FINDS THEM CLOSER THAN EVER BEFORE. (I. i. 241, page 79, and I. ii. 295, page 110.)

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